

# Beach-goers on the lookout for tar balls

**Ray Huard, Escondido North County Times, 6-4-11**

Tar balls -- those squishy, slimy, black gobs of goo that are nearly impossible to wash off ---- are making a sporadic reappearance on some San Diego County beaches, but so far few have hit North County.

Still, memories of a tar ball siege that struck beaches up and down the coastline last July has some people wondering whether the black gunk will befoul their beaches again this year.

"Everybody who was walking their dogs was complaining about it," said Peter Lonsdale, a professor of marine geology at Scripps Institution of Oceanography, of the tar ball appearances last year.

Tar balls are lumps or blobs of solidified petroleum.

On Thursday, a smattering of tar balls about the size of a quarter washed up on La Jolla beaches, said Nick Lerma, a spokesman for San Diego lifeguards.

"The guards reported they had quite a few people with tar stuck on their feet," Lerma said Friday. "It was sort of sporadically positioned on the beach."

By Friday, Lerma said, La Jolla beaches were pristine again, with no sign of the slimy stuff.

"We had so much surf so it might have just washed away," Lerma said.

Lonsdale said he didn't see anything on a morning beach stroll in La Jolla.

Father north, Encinitas Lifeguard Capt. Larry Giles said a few tar balls were spotted on the beach last week, but nothing to compare with last July, when big blobs of the stuff washed ashore.

"It was pretty bad. It was getting all over everything ---- our lifeguard towers, all of the equipment, your feet before you get in your car to go home. A lot of the surfers got it on their body and their boards," Giles said.

For about 10 days in July, tar balls ranging from quarter-size to platter-size washed ashore daily.

Lonsdale said there's no way to predict when or where the tar balls will show up.

Where they come from is still a bit of a mystery.

Last summer, some speculated that they came from an oil spill, but tests by the state Department of Fish and Game determined they were naturally occurring.

Lonsdale, the marine geologist, said some of the tar balls come from the Santa Barbara channel, where petroleum seeps up from the seafloor.

Strong currents can carry the tar south as far as San Diego, Lonsdale said.

Scripps scientists also have found a possible source off the coast of La Jolla.

Lonsdale said sonar soundings showed some evidence of oil or gas seeping out of the seabed.

"We keep meaning to go have a look," Lonsdale said.

In the case of Oceanside, Lonsdale said there could be seepage from some exploratory wells that were drilled offshore, then capped in the 1970s.

In Encinitas, Giles said lifeguards just keep a regular lookout for the stuff.

"It comes or goes when it wants to," Giles said.

Cleaning up the tar can be a challenge.

"The best way we've found to get it off equipment or shoes is nail polish remover," Giles said. "They make a lot of stuff out there to remove wax from surfboards, and I've used that, too."

Getting it off people is another matter.

Giles said he stopped making recommendations after some of the remedies he's used on himself caused skin irritation on others.

In Oceanside, Harbor and Beaches Director Frank Quan said he's seen no sign of tar balls yet this year, but he's ready if they start washing ashore again.

"If it's just a few of them, we'll send guys to pick them up," Quan said. If there's a rash of tar balls, he said, he'll run mechanical beach cleaners over the sand to scoop them up.