

Oil spill north of Ventura estimated at 210 gallons

Landslide suspected in pipeline break

Adam Foxman, Ventura County Star, 3-9-11

An estimated 55 gallons of oil spilled Tuesday into the ocean off the Pacific Coast Highway north of Ventura after a small landslide ruptured a pipeline on a nearby hillside, authorities said.

The oil poured down a creek and drained into the ocean about a mile north of Faria Beach, authorities said. The spill was contained about an hour after it was reported, but the oil spread over more than a quarter-mile of water, officials said.

There were no immediate reports of injured wildlife, but the state Department of Fish and Game closed the area to fishing, called in a wildlife care network to monitor the situation, and asked the public to stay away from the cleanup zone.

Firefighters responded to the spill about 8:30 a.m. after a camper reported seeing oil seeping into the water. Vintage Production, which owns the pipeline, began working to stem the spill after a company employee reported it about 8:15 a.m., said Bill Barrett, production coordinator for the oil company.

A mixture of crude oil and water began spilling after the rupture in the nearby hills, about three-quarters of a mile from shore, Barrett said. The exact cause of the small landslide was unknown, but officials said it was likely related to recent rain.

Bryan Vanden Bossche, a division chief for the Ventura County Fire Department, said the rupture apparently occurred about 10 p.m. Monday.

Early estimates put the total spilled at 210 gallons, or five barrels, said Carol Singleton, a Fish and Game spokeswoman.

Experts estimated about 55 gallons of the oil made its way to the ocean, Vanden Bossche said. About a mile of Javon Creek and a half-mile of shoreline north of Faria were affected, state officials said.

After the spill was reported, Vintage shut down the ruptured pipeline, erected dams along the creek to stop the downhill flow and put booms on the beach where the creek flows into the ocean, Barrett said.

Ventura city and county firefighters also responded, along with the Coast Guard, county Environmental Health Division, Ventura County Sheriff's Department, and Fish and Game. A sheriff's helicopter helped monitor the oil's spread.

Contractors working for Vintage used absorbent sheets and a vacuum truck to collect oil moving from the creek into the ocean.

Fish and Game and the Coast Guard were investigating the spill to verify the cause, determine whether maintenance or human error played a role, and evaluate the response by Vintage, Singleton said. Vintage is responsible for cleanup, wildlife and other costs, she said.

"It's not that big, really, but anything that gets into our ocean and impacts our habitat and our wildlife, we're concerned about," Singleton said.

Fish and Game officials closed indefinitely the shoreline to fishing — from Mussel Shoals north to Faria County Park. They also asked the public to stay away from the cleanup site until it is complete.

Officials were concerned about birds that tend to sit on the water where oil floats, and about the area's snowy plovers and otters, both listed as threatened species. Singleton said injured birds don't always show up right away. Fish and Game asked the Oiled Wildlife Care Network to monitor the situation, help distressed animals and test any that die.

The public should not try to rescue wildlife, because it can cause further injury. Instead, people can report injured wildlife to the Care Network at 877-823-6926.