

Large Natural Oil and Gas Seep Off Goleta Shows Signs of Slowing Down

Teachers see it up close in special 'Derricks to Desk' seminar trip

John Palminteri, KEYT News, 7-17-14

SANTA BARBARA CHANNEL, Calif. -A large oil and gas seep from a natural source in the Santa Barbara Channel, is no longer producing the widespread release it was known for.

In the 1980's the area was popping with gas bubbles from the underwater source. There was also clear evidence of oil in the water with brown streaks and globs at the surface unless they were broken up by wave action.

On a tour of the area Thursday, the same site only had a small surface release of natural gas and oil was stretched out in barely noticeable streaks. There was no obvious odor from the release. In past years, passengers on a boat sitting in the location too long would report impacts, and headaches.

The trip was sponsored by the Western States Petroleum Association and the SOS (Stop Oil Seeps) California organization from Santa Barbara.

Steve Greig from Venoco Oil, which operates Platform Holly near the seep site and other facilities in the area said the natural releases have been noticeably reduced in the last year. He believes production from the nearby platform has taken pressure off the seep zone.

It's also a position SOS has been researching for several years.

"This was the second largest natural seepage area in the world," said Greig. "Because of the production from Platform Holly a lot of that seepage has been reduced."

Seeing sites with oil sheens and gas bubbles was an education to a large group of teachers who were on board the Condor Express vessel as part of the "Derrick to Desk" energy seminar. They were learning about energy issues facing California by taking part in various field trips and meetings.

Even a small amount of naturally leaking oil and gas was intriguing to the instructors.

"I was shocked. We were really wondering why it doesn't end up on the shore quite honestly," said Erica Walker who teaches at Ritchen Elementary School in Oxnard. "It opens your eyes to the discussions and the controversy that is out there. It helps you see both sides for sure."

Thinking about how long seeps have been leaking in our coastal waters, Darrin Sundgren from Shafter High School in Kern County said, "how much has been seeping here for hundreds of years, maybe longer? That's incredible."

Sundgren was also learning about future energy jobs that he could recommend for his students, many who are interested in engineering.

Venoco Oil says Platform Holly has about 45 years left on its production schedule. "We've got a large reservoir that we just continue to produce," said Greig.

Changes in the natural seepage in the area has been closely monitored by many sources including U.C. Santa Barbara and the U.S. Minerals Management Service.

Both have reported pressure drops in the area of the seeps.

The coastal zone was also full of hundreds of common dolphins, and several sea lions on the morning trip.