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The Slo Coast Journal

California Sea Otter
(Enhydra lutris)

Marine Sanctuaries

July 2010

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Big Oil's Gifts Keep on Giving Legacy of Oil Contamination Shows the Need for a Marine Sanctuary

Oil Spill

by Carol Georgi
and Karl Kempton (former Energy Planner for San Luis Obispo County)

As we work toward establishing a Marine Sanctuary on our central coast, some background history will provide a context for the potential benefits and safeguards a Marine Sanctuary could provide.

Our hearts, minds, and prayers go out to the residents of the Gulf Coast who suffer due to the blowout gusher in the Gulf of Mexico. We are also heartbroken over the environmental damage occurring and will continue to occur for years to come. We know this heartache from direct experience.

The oil industry has left a legacy of contamination in San Luis Obispo (SLO) County. Our community has suffered possibly the two largest oil spills on land in the US, contaminating both land and water. Sadly, these polluting events could have been prevented by equipment maintenance, specifically of underground pipe lines, and by the provision of safety equipment. A 1994 study by the [American Petroleum Institute](#) indicated that "85% of oil refineries have groundwater contamination on site, and concluded that if facilities are not properly maintained and inspected, the risk of spills through leaks or rupture increase dramatically."

SLO County land and coastal ocean environments have suffered from our nation's largest onland spill that remains under the Oceano-Guadalupe Dune Complex. The spill began in 1954 and continued into the early 1990's. We may hold title to the nation's second largest spill from the April 7, 1926 SLO Tank Farm fire. Add to those the recent removal and replacement of Avila Beach. Moreover, in the mid 80's untold damage to our offshore ocean environment occurred when Big Oil used dynamite in San Luis and Estero Bays to create seismic waves in search for the now estimated 20 billion barrels of sour and peanut butter thick crude off our shores.

San Luis Obispo Tank Farm Fire

[Lightening struck the SLO Tank Farm](#), which did not have lightening rods, on April 7, 1926. The fire raged for about four days causing the loss of a reported 128 million gallons of oil. The flames reached upwards 1000 feet. The heat was so intense that tornados or intense whirlwinds formed, one of which tossed a home, killing its two occupants. The tanks boiled over;



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two weeks. In an attempt to reduce fuel for the fire, massive amounts of oil at the Avila Tank Farm were dumped into the ocean so that oil from the fire area could be pumped out of range.

Of the 128 million gallons of oil lost, no one knows how much oil was not burned and thus counted as spilled oil. If 15 percent, then 18.4 million gallons were spilled, thereby ranking it even with Unocal's other nationally top-ranked land spill in our county. There is no report of the quantities dumped in the ocean at Avila. The land at the old SLO Tank Farm remains toxic.

Because the oil in the western edge of our county is thick as peanut butter and full of sulfur (thus sour), a thin petroleum product with the consistency of diesel fuel was pumped into the oil pool underneath the Oceano-Guadalupe Dunes north of the Santa Maria River. This coastal dune complex, the largest in California, contains one of the largest number of endangered and threatened flora and fauna species in the state. Unocal laid pipe to each well to inject the thinner to insure easy extraction. But the company failed to maintain the integrity of the pipes, so they leaked an estimated 15 to 20 million gallons of thinner from 1954 to the early 1990's thereby giving them the honor of our nation's largest onland spill. The first cleanup phase was on the beach north of the Santa Maria River estuary in 1990. While a total thus far of 360,000 cubic feet of contaminated sand has been removed, the spill has not been thoroughly cleaned up. Since the spill is underground and on corporate private property, the environmental damage remains unquantified. No one knows the damage to local families who ate contaminated shore fish. ([Settle Post Intelligencer Report](#)) The area was and is still a popular sport fishing spot.

What has not been discussed, at least in public, is the threat of the rising ocean to this spill. As the ocean rises and salt water moves inland, the petroleum product in the sand, and possibly on the shallow water table, will be forced upwards and drain into the ocean.

The port of Avila Beach, shortly after 1900 to just after the 1926 SLO Tank Farm fire, was the world's largest oil port. No one knows how long the unmaintained pipes beneath Avila Beach leaked. No one knows how much petroleum product leaked. All that is known are the reports of how much sand and oil were removed once Unocal was forced to deal with its mess.

The internal politics of SLO county government handed the initial jurisdiction of the leak over to Public Works. At first essentially nothing was done. Consider the fact that since the second decade of the twentieth century, Big Energy has had a huge invisible hand in the back pockets of local government. Big Energy was first Big Oil, then Big Electricity was added, first in Morro Bay, then Diablo Canyon. Big Solar's power has already tossed out a county planning commissioner who used the County General Plan's specific wordage as leverage to protect our county's real treasure, our environment.

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Board sided with Unocal until the oil sheen under the Avila pier became too large and consistent to ignore. The first cleanup took place in 1990 from San Luis Creek to the pier. Afterwards, Unocal resisted further cleanup and responsibility for years.

One of the reasons they were able to stall was that the talented head of the Energy Division, with five years local experience, was politicked out of his job. There was no one close to his stature to replace him.

With the final cleanup, a total of over 400,000 gallons of petroleum product (oil, gasoline, and diesel fuel) sitting on the water table and enough beach sand to cover a football field 60 feet deep were removed. By dragging their heavy boots, Unocal created undo hardship on Avila families and property owners. Also, it is not unreasonable to speculate that had this head of the Energy Division remained with the county, cleanup for both Avila and the Dunes would have been sooner than later, the fines larger, and restoration more thorough.

Dynamite Blasting of Offshore Waters

The dynamite blasting of our offshore waters in the early 1980's is one of the first local legacies of the Federal Minerals Management Service. Its serious aiding and abetting of Big Oil begins under the Reagan mismanagement years with the baton in the hands of Secretary of Interior Watts. He allowed an unprecedented sale of offshore leases in federally controlled waters three miles from California's mean tide line. Before the bidding began, Big Oil was allowed to blow up our offshore waters. As usual for this outline, no one knows how much damage to the flora and fauna took place. No one knows how much life was destroyed at the plankton level, how many suspended and floating eggs were ripped apart, how many larva and young life forms exploded in the shock waves. No one knows what damage was done to the whale and dolphins and mature fish.

We do know that 1985 was the peak year of the fish landings in our county. Since then the landing numbers have steadily decreased. Big Oil, though, is not the only player in this act. This was also the time period when Diablo went on line, killing an estimated 1.5 billion larval lives per year in the once-through cooling system. A few years earlier, the South County sewer treatment plant expansion had begun dumping five million gallons of treated sewage that mixed pharmaceutical, soap, and cleanser chemicals daily into the ocean. These are harmful to ocean life. Other sewer ocean dumping systems added to this chemical mix. Pesticide usage continued its steady increase on our farms, some of which found its way into the ocean in agricultural runoff. Over fishing and destruction of ocean habitat by trawlers dragging nets also contributed to this ongoing decline.

Two Final Questions

In 1990, the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors approved a National Marine Sanctuary off our coast. All local governments except Arroyo Grade approved it. The Arroyo Grande City Council wanted farmers to be allowed pesticide runoff into the ocean.

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Have the research papers and final comments against Minerals Management Service offshore oil program, written during the same time period, also disappeared? This work was instrumental in helping defeat plans for offshore oil platforms off our coastline.

From reviewing these horrific events, it is clear a Marine Sanctuary could provide protection from future oil-related environmental disasters. Of course the main, and generally hidden behind the scene, opponents for a marine sanctuary are the polluters and those entities they buy off with "grants and gifts."

Banner Image of Otter & Pup by [Cleve Nash](#)

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