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CITY OF LOS ANGELES • DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS • BUREAU OF SANITATION

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Ballona Creek Oil Spill Investigation Reveals Source

By Laurel Airica



Cleanup crew works to stop the mysterious oil spill from reaching the Santa Monica Bay.

Fortunately, the water level in the creek was low on the 11th and the current was moving slowly. This provided cleanup crews with enough time to employ a variety of means to stop the flow before it could enter the ocean less than 5 miles away.

Over the next 24-hours, crews used vacuum trucks and a series of booms deployed at Centinela Avenue and Lincoln Boulevard to absorb a majority of the spill before it could enter the outlet. Crewmembers also retrieved large clumps of tar-like gunk from the creek water, using flat bottom boats to pursue and remove the oil.

A potential disaster was averted by an alert passerby—and by the unified response of an interagency task force in preventing an oil slick approximately 4 miles long and 20 feet wide from reaching Santa Monica Bay.

In the early afternoon of October 11th, near La Cienega and West Washington Boulevards, the observant pedestrian recognized and reported the sticky slick traveling down Ballona Creek, one of the regions major storm water channels. The creek carries rainwater—as well as polluted urban runoff from home irrigation systems, car washes, construction sites, etc. from Los Angeles and Culver City directly to the Bay at Playa del Rey.

Had the oil slick reached the Bay, it would have created major ecological devastation.

Assisted by volunteers, the State Fish and Game Department worked to clean up and care for the 42 captured birds that were damaged by the spill, including mallards, coots, cormorants, and grebes. Only one of these waterfowl died. However, wildlife veterinarian Scott Newman, who worked at the scene, believes that many other birds were probably injured by the spill. "No one can tell what the long-term effects will be," he pointed out.

"This was a good win for us," according to Tom Napoli, a scientist for the *Fish and Game Department*. Countless other animals could have been harmed—including the federally endangered Brown Pelican—if weather conditions and the coordinated

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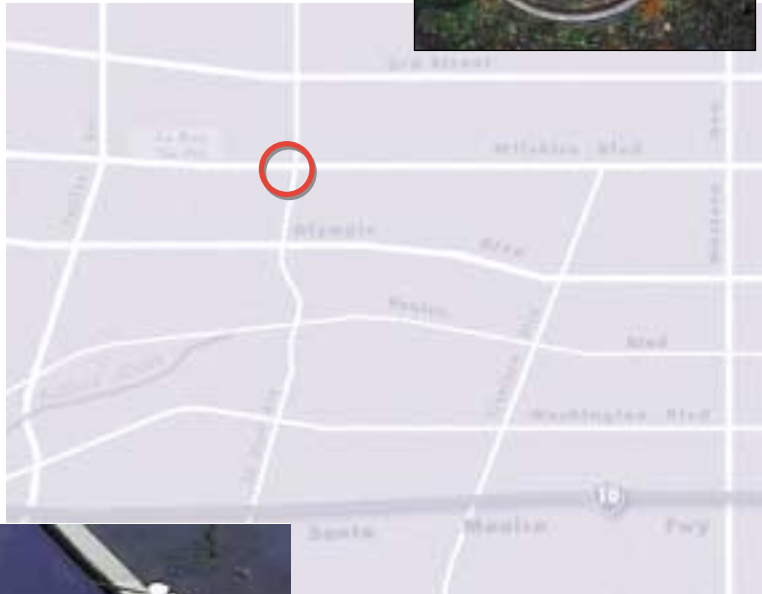
New Domain Name

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cleanup operations hadn't worked out so favorably.

Searching for the Source

The initial source suspects for this accident were the two oil companies that operate three pipelines in the area. At the request of the Fire Department, they shut off the stream of oil. But the fact that the flow then tapered to a trickle, turned out to be merely coincidental.

Further investigations conducted by Stormwater inspectors Rob McNabb and Bob Maldonado, along with crew from the County's *Fire Department and Flood Control Division*, the *U.S. Coastguard*, the *Department of Fish and Game*, and a special agent from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, uncovered a very different story. Working through the night and most of the next day, the team tracked the residual flow up City storm drain lines to a residential area in the neighborhood of the La Brea tar pits.

Spotting tar-like substances in maintenance holes along a city-owned storm drain, the inspectors narrowed their search to a catch basin on the SW corner of 6th and Hauser where a 4" line was oozing an oil/tar mixture. The source of the drip was finally traced to an underground

device for separating oil and water. Inspectors McNabb and Maldonado (along with a USEPA agent), located the device in the garage of a 168-unit complex on Masselin Avenue

Such pumping devices are used in many residences to separate the oil from the water. Once separated, the water is safe to discharge into the storm drain system and the collected oil can be sold to refineries. But without proper maintenance, malfunctions occur, such as the one that resulted in about 500 gallons of oily water and tar leaking into the nearby storm drain and then down through Ballona Creek. Because spilling oil into waterways is a violation of state and federal laws, the building owners may be fined three times what the government pays for cleanup costs. The owners have thus far covered the estimated \$200,000 cleanup expense. The LA Regional Water Quality Board, which issued the permit for the oil/water separator, ordered the owners of the building complex to ensure that there will be no further spills into runoff lines and the creek.

Annual Stormwater Program Stakeholder Workshop Held

On October 21, the Stormwater Management Division held its second annual update meeting to apprise stakeholders of its current efforts and future plans for curbing ocean pollution. In attendance at the meeting were city employees, leaders of environmental groups, representatives from regulatory agencies, and members of the general public to provide a window to future projects.

On hand were representatives from Heal the Bay, BayKeeper, the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board, and representatives from the City's various departments, bureaus as well as members from the Board of Public Works. Program Manager Gary Lee Moore gave an overview presentation on the program's accomplishments ranging from Capital Improvement Projects to its work with flood control and pollution abatement.

This presentation is available as a downloadable PDF document from the Stormwater Program's web site at www.LAstormwater.org.



New Domain Name:

www.LAstormwater.org



A new addition to the program's web site are pages explaining the storm drain system's design and history, as well as the problems associated with urban runoff.

The City of Los Angeles Stormwater Management Division has a new URL, making it easier than ever to find us on the web.

Up until recently, those who wished to visit our web site had to type in a long string of forgettable letters to find us. Now, with the registration of our new domain name, you can easily access a wealth of information about our pollution-prevention education programs for businesses, residents, and school children. All you have to do is remember *Los Angeles Stormwater* and LAstormwater.org will come to mind to find vital tips for preventing stormwater pollution at home, work, and play.

Future additions to the site will include interactive games for children as well as downloadable program documents.

Stormwater 'Creature' Haunts the California Science Center

On October 30th, over 2,000 young ghosts, ghouls and assorted goblins gathered together at the California Science Center's first annual "Spooky-Kooky" Fest to feast on Halloween treats and educational exhibitions.

Everyone found plenty of food for thought at the Stormwater Program table. While parents learned of the horrific consequences of polluted urban runoff, their "little monsters" posed with the towering Creature from the Storm Drain and learned how they could help defeat this hulking beast that threatens to ruin our cities and ocean environment. A terrifying time was enjoyed by all.

