

Pipeline rupture causes oil spill in California

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An on-shore oil pipeline ruptured near the coastal city of Santa Barbara, California on Tuesday, causing as much as 105,000 gallons of crude to spill onto the shore. State officials say that at least 21,000 gallons of that oil has reached the sea, causing an oil slick that spans nine miles.

The Santa Barbara County Supervisor, Doreen Farr, described the incident as “a disaster,” and California Governor Jerry Brown has declared a state of emergency to support the cleanup efforts.

Photos of the area show beaches covered in crude oil and birds and other creatures blanketed in oil. Sean Anderson, a marine biologist from California State University, rushed with a team of students to examine the damage. He told NBC News that the best case scenario would be that cleanup crews would be able to contain the damage to one beach alone and prevent the slick from spreading further into the ocean and other beaches.

The Santa Barbara Channel is a major migration spot for rare sea birds. Linda Krop, chief counsel for the Environmental Defense Center (EDC), a Santa Barbara environmental organization, told the *Los Angeles Times* that the Santa Barbara Channel was “one of the most biologically rich places on the planet.” Her organization described the spill as “devastating” in a public statement, and called the area the “Galapagos” of North America.

The company that owns the pipeline, Plains All American Pipeline LP, does not know exactly how much oil was spilled. A company official, Darren Palmer, said that the line was operating at maximum capacity, running at a rate of roughly 50,400 gallons an hour. The on-shore coastal pipeline was leaking for several hours into a storm drain before it was shut off.

Palmer apologized on behalf of the company for the spill, stating, “we did everything we can to prevent it from happening.” However, in their statement, the EDC

raised several questions “that have yet to be answered” by the company.

The EDC asked why, in a “relatively new pipeline,” there was no automatic shut-off procedure. It also asked “why the early response was not more successful in halting the flow of crude oil.”

A major spill happened in the same area in 1969. During January and early February of that year an off-shore platform experienced a ‘blow-out’ of high-pressure gas due to the inadequate, sub-standard casing of its well.

Thousands of animals were killed by that spill, including dolphins, migratory sea birds, sea lions and elephant seals. The spill was covered widely in US media at the time and had an impact in the passage of environmental legislation in the late 60s and early 70s.

Many scientific studies were conducted on the spill and its effect. One study stated that smaller organisms such as barnacles were most dramatically affected, with die-off rates exceeding fifty percent.

The quantity of oil spilled in the 1969 spill was estimated at between 80,000 to 100,000 barrels. Plains All American Pipeline estimates that its pipeline could have spilled as much as 105,000 barrels; however, only a fifth of that is expected to have reached the ocean.

In addition to its environmental significance, the latest spill will also have an impact on tourism, since the beaches affected are major tourist attractions. Many beachside communities in California rely, especially during the summer months, on revenues from campers and travelers spending time at the beaches.

The spill in Santa Barbara comes just over a week after the Obama Administration gave Shell Oil a green light to resume its drilling operations in the Arctic. Operations had been suspended three years ago after several near-disasters, including the running aground of a drilling rig and malfunctions of important safety-related machinery.

The new spill is also the first major spill in the United States since the BP Horizon disaster five years ago, which killed eleven workers and discharged over 200 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.



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