

CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION

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**Coastal Commission Pushes Cleanup of Newport Beach “Tire Reef”**

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GoPro video and photos available upon request

NEWPORT BEACH, Calif. _ Nearly 30 years after a company promised to turn a pile of scrap tires, plastic jugs and PVC pipe it dumped off Balboa Peninsula into a thriving reef, divers are finally hauling away the trash with funding from the California Coastal Commission.

The Coastal Commission negotiated the cleanup with the Karen C. Drayer Wildlife Health Center, at the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine using mitigation funds collected from a different project. Last week divers began pulling tires out of the water and onto a commercial urchin fishing boat, averaging more than 100 tires a day.

“It’s about time this was cleaned up. Dumping plastic and other trash into our oceans is not the way to restore the marine ecosystem,” said Coastal Commission Chair Dayna Bochco. “There is an estimated 18 billion pounds of plastic that enters the world’s oceans every year and we must do what we can to clean this up.”

The late Rodolphe Streichenberger, president of the now defunct Marine Forests Society, claimed in the late 1980s the project would recycle tires, grow mussels for commercial harvest and enhance the ocean. His research, however, was deeply flawed. He failed to ensure the protection of the marine environment and without the necessary permits, built the 10-acre project with 1,500 half buried tires, 2,000 plastic jugs and 100 20-foot PVC pipes along the ocean floor.

State scientists said the tires contained harmful toxins, the material was not dense enough to anchor to the ocean floor and warned the discarded netting and ropes could trap fish and marine mammals. The commission denied Streichenberger a retroactive permit in 1997 and eventually issued a cease-and-desist order to clean up the mess.

Steichenberger filed a lawsuit in 2000, claiming the commission was an unconstitutional agency and lacked authority to require permits or take enforcement action. The case went all the way to the California Supreme Court and the commission’s authority was sustained.

“It’s hard to believe there was a time when someone thought this was a good idea,” said the commission’s Executive Director Jack Ainsworth. “We now know that plastic is poison in the ocean, polluting every level of the food chain.”

Over the years, teams of state scientists from the commission and Department of Fish and Wildlife organized dives to assess the situation. Instead of a thriving kelp forest and hundreds of

fish species, the tires were covered with the type of marine life commonly found on pier pilings and boat bottoms. Currents had spread many of the PVC pipes along with other plastic mesh, netting, polyurethane foam and concrete blocks haphazardly around the sea floor.

Cleanup efforts stalled because the commission had no mechanism for collecting financial penalties at the time. Earlier this year, however, the agency negotiated mitigation fees as part of a permit to install underwater fiber optic cables off Hermosa Beach, and are applying those fees to the cleanup.

Kirsten Gilardi, assistant director at the Wildlife Health Center School, said it was time to finally remove the controversial experiment.

“There’s no native kelp, just a few fish swimming around,” she said, “It’s nothing like the diversity and density you’d see on a natural rocky reef off the Southern California coast.”