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**W 10****MEMORANDUM**

February 18, 1999

TO: Commissioners and Interested Parties

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SUBJECT: Investigation Update — South Traffic Lane Oil Spill of September 1998

**March 10, 1999, Item No. 10****THE SPILL**

On September 27, 1998, a fishing vessel reported an oil slick 10 miles long and 2–4 meters wide approximately ten miles west of the Golden Gate in the southbound traffic lanes. The oil moved southeast toward the San Mateo County coast, eventually reaching landfall along a fifteen-mile stretch from San Gregorio State Beach to Gazos Creek in San Mateo County ( map). The Office of Spill Prevention and Response (OSPR) and U.S. Coast guard (USCG) took samples of the oil and analyzed it for “fingerprints”. The oil was identified as bunker fuel oil.

**THE RESPONSE**

Clean Bay deployed two response vessels to the area and five Shoreline Cleanup Assessment Teams (SCAT) surveyed beaches from Half Moon Bay to Año Nuevo State Park for signs of oil. FOSS Environmental deployed protective boom at several sensitive sites (Gazos Creek, Pescadero Marsh, San Gregorio Creek). The Incident Command directed the cleanup and recovered approximately 1,322 gallons of oil from the water and over 9,200 pounds of tar balls and oiled debris from beaches. The oil was seen scattered in a ten square mile area off the San Mateo Coast. An OSPR over-flight on October 8 showed little movement of the remaining patch of sheen and tar balls. The spill response and cleanup concluded approximately three weeks after the spill was first reported, with costs totaling \$1.25 million dollars.

## IMPACTS

### Impacted Area:

SCAT teams found tar balls on San Gregorio, Pescadero, and Gazos Creek beaches in bands several feet wide and covering approximately 1–10% of the sand area. Small amounts of oil were also observed on several beaches around Pillar Point Harbor, including the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve. SCAT teams were able to notify the Incident Command and have cleanup crews respond within hours. This quick response helped to minimize additional impacts to shore birds. Beaches were cleaned using crews with rakes and absorbent pads. The OSPR, State Parks and Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary staff closely monitored the use of All-Terrain Vehicles (ATV) to ensure there were no impacts to beach wildlife.

### Wildlife:

Four wildlife recovery teams focused their initial efforts in the vicinity of Half Moon Bay, with teams systematically canvassing areas as far south as Monterey Bay. The Department of Fish and Game's Oiled Wildlife Care Network (OWCN) was activated on September 30. Affected birds were captured by OWCN wildlife care experts and transported to the Santa Cruz Wildlife Veterinary Care and Research Center for treatment and rehabilitation. Over 150 birds were confirmed killed by the oil; 74 birds (mostly Common Murres) were collected live and treated; of these, about 33 survived. The oil was very caustic, causing severe and debilitating skin burns on many birds. It was especially difficult to wash and rehabilitate the oiled birds, as the skin lesions caused by the oil made it difficult for the birds to adequately preen and regain their water repellency. Several birds remained in long-term care for weeks following the official termination of the spill response and cleanup.

No otters, seals or sea lions were known to be impacted by the spill.

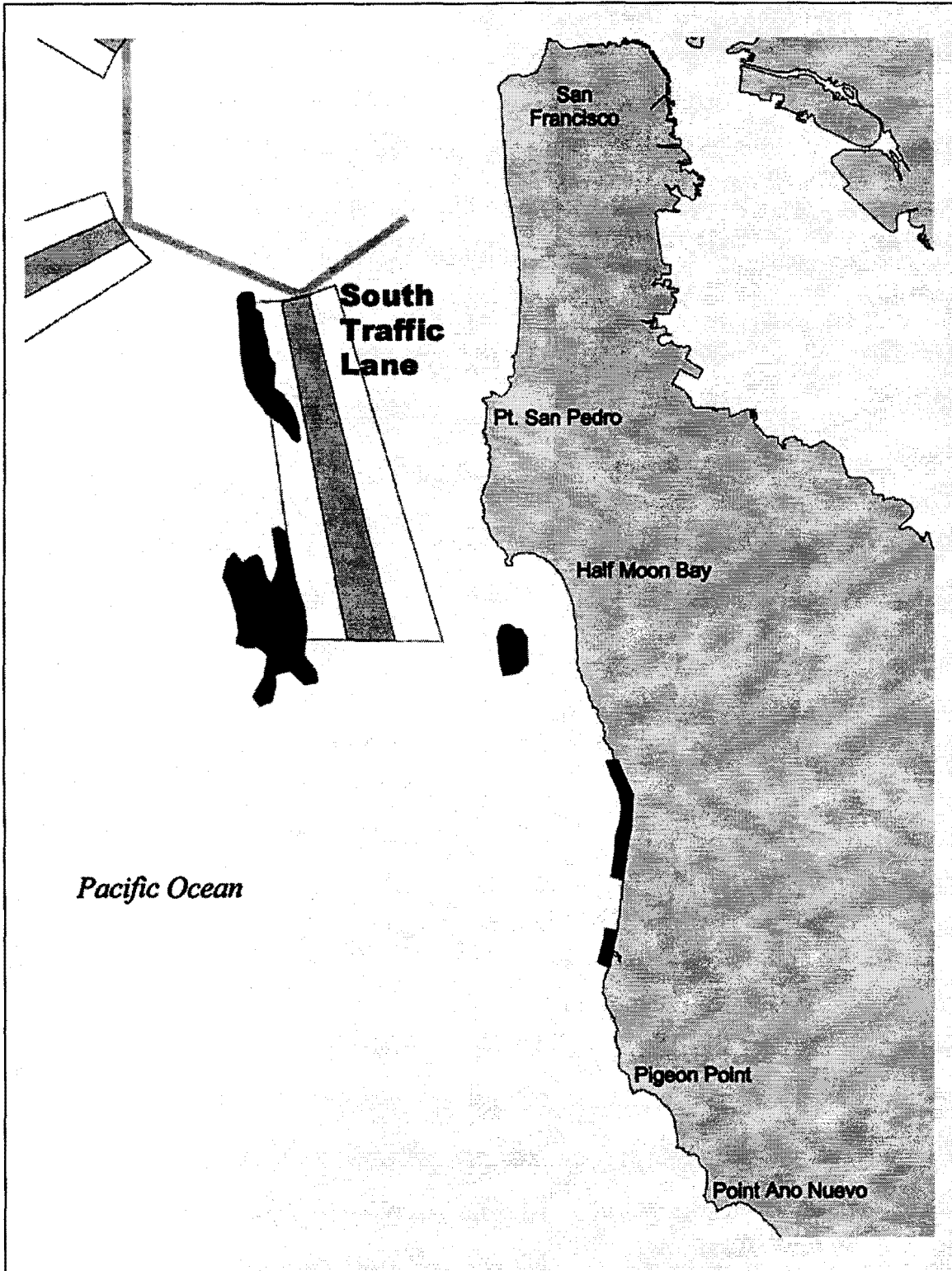
## INVESTIGATION

During a separate oil spill event on September 24, 1998, the tanker vessel *Command*, a 717-foot Liberian-flagged ship managed and operated by the Pearl Shipping Company leaked an unknown amount of oil into San Francisco Bay from a 6 inch by ½ inch crack in a fuel tank. FOSS environmental, Clean Bay and the Coast Guard responded immediately to that spill and were able to quickly contain and recover the oil. The T/S *Command* left San Francisco Bay on September 26 after making repairs to their fuel tank. The USCG collected oil samples from the South Traffic Lane oil spill immediately after it was reported and the USCG Marine Safety Laboratory and the OSPR Petroleum Chemistry Lab matched it to those samples taken from the earlier September 24 T/S *Command* spill.

The *Command* was resighted by a Coast Guard C-130 airplane on October 2, traveling southbound along the Pacific coast. It was followed by the Coast Guard into international waters 200 miles south of Guatemala. The *Command* was stopped and boarded by the U.S. Coast Guard under international agreements and with the express permission of the Liberian Government. The Coast Guard used this authority to board the vessel, but they did not have authority to seize the vessel. The Coast Guard conducted 33 hours of investigation while the *Command* was still at sea, collecting additional oil samples to compare with those collected from the spill. OSPR and Coast Guard labs both confirmed a 100% match of oil samples. The Coast Guard conducted another four days of investigation when the *Command* docked in Panama for repairs.

On December 9, 1998, the U.S. Attorney General in San Francisco announced the grand jury indictment of the Liberian company that owns the tanker (Pearl Shipping Corporation), the Greek company that manages and operates the ship (ANAX International Agencies Inc.), the captain (Dimitrios Georgantas) and the chief engineer (Lampros Karaganis).

On January 26, 1999, the captain and chief engineer voluntarily returned to California to face charges in federal court. They were accused of deliberately dumping oil into the Pacific ocean, failing to notify the Coast Guard of the spill, and conspiring to violate the Clean Water Act. They face up to 13 years in prison and \$750,000 in fines if convicted of all charges. Both were released on bail, but required to return to court on seven days' notice.



**T/S Command Spill, Sept-Oct 1998**

Composite (multi-day) drawing showing initial deposition of oil in south traffic lane and movement to the beaches of San Mateo County (courtesy Dept. of Fish and Game, OSPR).