

**CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION**

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# Tu 14

Date: May 24, 1999

To: Coastal Commissioners and Interested Parties

From: Susan M. Hansch, Deputy Director  
Alison J. Dettmer, Manager, Energy & Ocean Resources Unit  
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SUBJECT: **Briefing on PEMEX Oil Spill, Rosarito, Mexico**

**Tuesday, June 8, 1999, Item 14.**

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## THE SPILL

On Thursday, May 12, 1999, the Chevron-owned tank vessel *M/V Samuel H. Armacost* spilled No. 6 fuel oil during offshore transfer operations at Mexico's PEMEX (Petroleos Mexicanos) refinery at Rosarito Beach, off the west coast of Baja California and 50 miles south of San Diego. At 3 p.m., the vessel, moored 1.5 miles offshore, began offloading the heavy oil via a 16-inch diameter underwater pipe. At 5:30 p.m., PEMEX detected an apparent crack in the pipe, which allowed discharge of oil into the ocean. The vessel responded by shutting down their offload operations. The vessel was carrying 122,000 barrels (5,124,000 million gallons) of oil, and it was uncertain how much had spilled between the time the faulty pipe was detected and the vessel ceased its offloading. Initial estimates were that at least 1,000 barrels (42,000 gallons) of oil had spilled, washing ashore along 1.25 miles of beach at Rosarito, and that 2,600 barrels (109,200 gallons) were unaccounted for and expected to move north into California waters. At immediate risk in California was the Tijuana Estuary, home to endangered Least Terns and Snowy Plovers. Early expectations were that the oil could reach U.S. waters and the Tijuana Estuary by 3 p.m. on May 15.

## THE RESPONSE

The Mexican Navy stationed two of their Navy skimmer vessels near the site of the spill, and called in Advanced Cleanup Technologies, Inc. (ACTI) from San Diego to conduct shoreline cleanup. On May 14, the U.S. Coast Guard established a Unified Command Center at its Marine Safety Office in San Diego. Representatives from the Coast Guard, the California Department of Fish and Game/Office of Spill Prevention and Response (OSPR), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service formed the Unified Command. The OSPR also established an Operations Center in Sacramento, and put the its southern California field staff and the Oiled Wildlife Care Network on full alert. Chevron established its own command center in San Francisco.

An overflight conducted by the Coast Guard on May 15 covered the areas from the site of the spill through the Imperial Beach. A light rainbow sheen about 100 meters long was spotted in close proximity to the Mexican pipeline through which the oil was pumped. A data marker buoy dropped in the area of the spill the previous night drifted only a few hundred yards to the south, indicating little movement of floating oil into U.S. waters. Small numbers of tar balls were reported on a beach north of the Tijuana Estuary, but it was not thought that they were due to the PEMEX spill.

## **IMPACTS**

On May 17 (Saturday) the Coast Guard reported the slick continuing to move south, and by Sunday did not see any traces of the oil along the shoreline or in the water. Two assessment teams also surveyed the shoreline and reported no major environmental impacts. In response to the reduced threat of this spill to U.S. waters, OSPR on May 17 closed its Operations Center, and the Coast Guard closed its Unified Command Center on May 18.

A total of four oil-soaked birds (Western grebes) were collected from the San Diego area during this spill response. The birds were taken to SeaWorld San Diego for treatment, but suffered serious skin burns from the oil and did not survive. Autopsies showed stomachs filled with bird feathers that had been oiled and then swallowed during preening. A Coast Guard spokesman believes the oiled birds are not necessarily due to the PEMEX spill.

The extent of the oiling to Mexican beaches is still not known, although PEMEX officials now indicate that perhaps only 250 gallons of oil had been spilled. PEMEX officials report that PEMEX employees, Mexico Navy personnel and ACTI staff have cleaned up 95 percent of the spilled oil.

## **INVESTIGATION**

Mike Farley, commander of the USCG MSO San Diego office, cannot explain the discrepancies in amounts of oil originally thought to have been spilled with those later reported by PEMEX. U.S. beach patrols will continue to survey beaches for several weeks in case oil currently on the bottom of the ocean resurfaces.

PEMEX and the Coast Guard have split the oil samples found in U.S. waters and will fingerprint them independently.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

A Mexican consular official in San Diego served as liaison with the Coast Guard during the response. Nevertheless, there were early reports of the Coast Guard having difficulty getting clearance from Mexican authorities to conduct aerial overflights of the spill area.

The insurer for PEMEX was in direct consultation with the Coast Guard Unified Command, but Commander Farley reports that cross-border cooperation could have been better. Commander Farley is urging Coast Guard headquarters to "reinvigorate" an existing joint response plan between the Coast Guard and Mexico's Navy.

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# unified command center

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## Federal and State agencies prepare for oil spill

*Incident Command System set up to minimize potential impact to U.S. resources*

SAN DIEGO -- The Unified Command Center (consists of U.S. Coast Guard, California Department of Fish & Game, U.S. Fish & Wildlife) with the support of the U.S. Navy, is preparing to protect United States resources from oil that has spilled less than 2 miles west of Rosarito, Mexico.

At 3 p.m. Thursday, the U.S.-flagged, Chevron-owned Motor Vessel Samuel H. Armacost began offload operations of #6 fuel oil to the PEMEX (the Mexican national oil company) Facility in Rosarito via 16-inch diameter underwater pipe. The M/V Samuel H. Armacost was about 1.5 miles off shore. At 5:30 p.m., PEMEX detected a problem with the pipe and the M/V Samuel H. Armacost shut down offload operations.

The amount of #6 fuel oil in the water remains unknown. PEMEX contracted Advanced Cleanup Technologies Inc. (ACTI) to clean up the oil that has spilled in Mexico. ACTI reported that oil has reached Mexican beaches.

Clay Clifton, San Diego County Dept. of Environmental Health, said warning signs will be posted at beaches should the fuel oil cross the U.S. border. The health risk from exposure to water contaminated with #6 fuel oil is minimal. The fuel oil is not reactive, toxic nor explosive in water. Exposure may result in skin irritation -- if exposed, wash skin with soap and water. For more information call the Poison Control Center at 800-411-8080. For beach closure information call 619-338-2073.

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\*\*\*MEDIA ADVISORY\*\*\* A news briefing will be held at 5:30 p.m. at the Coast Guard Marine Safety Office, 2710 N. Harbor Drive, San Diego.

STATE OF CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME  
OFFICE OF OIL SPILL PREVENTION AND RESPONSE

Contact: Roger Richardson  
Phone: 916-445-0045

Date: 5/14/99  
Time: 2000

SITUATION REPORT  
PEMEX SPILL

The Department of Fish & Game's Office of Oil Spill Prevention and Response (OSPR) is monitoring the PEMEX pipeline that cracked during off-loading of #6 fuel oil from Chevron tank vessel, *Samuel H. Armacost*, at Mexico's PEMEX refinery at Rosarito Beach. The vessel was carrying 122,000 barrels of this heavy fuel oil.

The refinery's pipeline apparently cracked discharging the heavy fuel oil into the ocean. Mexican officials are at the scene with two of their Navy skimmer vessels. The United States Coast Guard has set up a command center at San Diego Marine Safety Office (619-683-6495). The Mexican government has brought Advanced Clean-up Technologies Inc. (ACTI) onboard for spill clean-up. Chevron has also set up their own command center in San Francisco (415-894-8888) to monitor the spill.

The leading edge of the spill is approximately 3 miles south of the U.S.-Mexican border. Mexican officials have stated approximately 1,000 barrels (42,000 gallons) of oil have washed onto their shores. PEMEX is estimating the total oil spill to be approximately 2,600 barrels (109,200 gallons).

OSPR field staff have estimated the spill could reach U.S. shores at 1500 hours on May 15. The OSPR has placed its Oiled Wildlife Care Network (OWCN) and its southern California field staff on full alert. Several OSPR personnel (Lt. Steve Edinger as the State Incident Commander; Robin Lewis as the State biologist; Paul Hamilton as the State investigator and OSPS Vern Josey) are on scene at the Coast Guard command center in San Diego.

Several people have been dispatched from OSPR headquarters in Sacramento to assist with the spill threat to U.S. waters.

Of special concern is the Tijuana Slough, home to the endangered Least Terns and Snowy Plovers. Prepositioning of protective barriers have been set at the mouth of the slough to protect the natural resources. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are also on scene and involved in decisions regarding wildlife impacts.

## Officials of state-owned oil company downplay spill on Mexican coast

ASSOCIATED PRESS

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MEXICO CITY -- Fuel oil spilled while being unloaded off Mexico's Baja California coast has washed up on about 1 1/4 miles (2 kms) of beaches near the beach town of Rosarito, officials of Mexico's state-owned oil company have confirmed.

However, officials of Petroleos Mexicanos downplayed the impact of the spill, saying it involved much less oil than originally estimated and has mostly been cleaned up, local media reported Sunday.

The spill occurred Thursday evening when a pipe carrying fuel oil from the "Samuel H. Armacost" tanker, operated by the Chevron oil company, to a Pemex onshore facility apparently sprung a leak.

The spill involved only about 250 gallons (1,000 liters) of fuel oil but appeared greater because that type of oil spreads easily on water, officials of Pemex' Maritime Terminals and Environmental Protection office told the newspaper El Universal at a press conference in Rosarito, 50 miles (80 kms) south of San Diego, California.

A spokesman at Pemex' headquarters in Mexico City was unable to confirm that report. Original estimates had placed the spill at over 100,000 gallons.

Pemex employees, navy personnel and employees of San Diego-based Advanced Clean-up Technologies, a private firm, had cleaned up 95 percent of the spilled fuel oil, the officials said.

The U.S. Coast Guard said the remaining oil slick was drifting south, away from the United States.<

Tar balls washed ashore in San Diego County and two oil-soaked birds were recovered from a beach on Coronado Island, but there was no immediate confirmation they were caused by the spill, said Chief Warrant Officer Jerry Snyder, a Coast Guard spokesman.

"There's no evidence that they belong to this particular spill," he said. "Most of the evidence points away from it."

# oil spill INTELLIGENCE REPORT®

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## US Remains on Lookout for Heavy Oil Spilled in Mexico

The US Coast Guard (USCG) and wildlife agents will remain on the lookout for oiling of beaches in the southern part of the US state of California for several weeks, following an unexplained spill of heavy fuel oil from a Petróleos Mexicanos (PEMEX) pipeline under the Pacific Ocean at Rosarito, Baja California, Mexico, on 13 May. A few tarballs and four oiled birds washed ashore at Imperial Beach, California, about 16 km north of the spill site.

State-owned PEMEX claims it lost only 252 gallons (less than 1 tonne) of oil intended for a Rosarito power plant — but the Mexican environmental agency PROFEPA estimates the spill at 42,000 gallons (143 tonnes).

Oil spilled from the 41-cm pipeline in 15 m of water while the Chevron tanker Samuel H. Armacost was unloading into a PEMEX buoy about 2.7 km offshore of Rosarito, officials say. Oil tarred at least 1 km of beach, says Augustine Rodriguez, a Mexican consular official in San Diego, California, who served as liaison with USCG during the response.

PEMEX first reported a major spill of 109,000 gallons (371 tonnes), but dropped the estimate to 252 gallons (less than 1 tonne) on 18 May — to the astonishment of USCG.

“I can’t refute that, but we had people on the scene telling us it looked a lot bigger,” says Mike Farley, commander of the USCG Marine Safety Office (MSO) in San Diego. The official PEMEX estimate “seems very low to us,” agreed Antonio Ibarra, PROFEPA chief in Tijuana, Baja California, in a comment to the *San Diego Union* newspaper.

With the permission of Mexican authorities, Farley’s command flew over the Baja California coast on 15 May, observing a 12-m spot of sheen and oil along 3 km of beaches, Farley reports. However, PEMEX contends that workers completed the cleanup on 14 May. PEMEX’s brief, official statement — issued in Mexico on 15 May and in the US on 18 May — did not explain the discrepancies. In case

“there is still a lot of oil on the bottom in Mexico,” US beach patrols will keep a watch for oil for several weeks, Farley says.

The insurer for PEMEX consulted directly and beneficially with the USCG unified command during the response, but cross-border cooperation could have been better, Farley says, who is urging USCG headquarters and the Mexican Navy to “reinvigorate” an existing joint response plan.

The two nations have held joint exercises, during the spill, USCG’s Mexican contact information proved outdated, he says. “This is opportunity to exploit this bad circumstance and turn it into something good,” says Farley. He has invited his Mexican counterparts to the San Diego MSO, study its response capability, and discuss joint issues.

PEMEX and the USCG have split the oil samples found in the US and will fingerprint them independently, Farley says. The four oiled birds found in the US were western grebes, and died despite treatment, he reports.