

Risk of SD oil spill addressed

BY JOE TASH
Contributor

San Diego County may not be home to offshore oil drilling platforms, but it still faces a risk of oil spills from military and tanker ships, tanker-trucks and an oil pipeline from Los Angeles, said experts at a forum held in Kearny Mesa last week.

The forum on the potential for oil spills in the region was organized by San Diego Coastkeeper at

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a time when the public's attention has been focused for much of the summer on the response to a massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico caused by an explosion on a drilling rig. The Aug. 26 forum attracted more than 80 people.

"For the most part, the risks in San Diego are not near what you have in Los Angeles," said Steve Weisberg, a scientist and executive director of the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project.

But Robin D. Lewis, senior environmental scientist with the California Office of Spill Prevention and Response, said in an interview after the forum that although San Diego doesn't have offshore oil rigs — which can be found off the Orange and Los Angeles County coastline as well as off Santa Barbara and other locations — the risk of oil spills exists.

"It's shipping traffic — that's the thing here, shipping and boating," said

More info

Those seeking information about boating regulations or to report a spill can contact the U.S. Coast Guard at (619) 278-7031 or (800) 424-8802.

Lewis. Other concerns include a pipeline along the Interstate 5 corridor that leads to a refinery in the Mission Gorge area and trucks that bring in loads of 8,000 gallons of gasoline on local roads.

Navy ships bring large amounts of fuel into San Diego Bay for ships and aircrafts, and the Navy operates a large tank farm near Point Loma.

"They (the Navy) manage and handle an enormous amount of product on a daily basis," said Lewis. Although the Navy has a good safety record and very few spills have

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occurred over the years, he said, "things happen."

Among the largest oil spills in California history were a blowout at an oil platform off the coast of Santa Barbara in 1969, and a tanker spill near Huntington Beach in 1990, caused when a tanker ship ran over its anchor, spilling 400,000 gallons of oil, Weisberg said.

Tanker spills also occurred in San Francisco Bay in 2007 and 2009, he said.

Statewide, some 1,000 oil spills occur each year on average, said Lewis, with most of them occurring inland.

Lewis' office works closely with the U.S. Coast Guard, which would also be a primary responder to any spill incident on the coast or in the bay.

Michael Salviati, a local Coast Guard representative, said on average, about 5,300 gallons of oil are discharged into San Diego waters each year, mostly from such incidents as a boat sinking or developing a leak in a tank or fuel line.

The Coast Guard's response to an oil spill includes efforts to identify the "responsible party" and get them to initiate cleanup action, Salviati said.

If the responsible party can't be located or is unwilling to act, then the Coast Guard would begin the cleanup using money from a special trust fund and seek to recover costs later.

The Coast Guard also works with state and local officials to plan for a large-scale spill and conducts drills and exercises to prepare for such an event, Salviati said.

Another panelist, former Huntington Beach mayor Debbie Cook, noted that efforts to expand oil drilling won't be able to satisfy the nation's energy needs and suggested the public needs to push elected officials to pursue the development of renewable energy sources.

"We need to divorce ourselves from oil, it's going to be messy," Cook said.

According to Weisberg, although oil spills capture

the most attention, they actually are responsible for a relatively small percentage of oil found in ocean waters. The largest source, he said, is seepage from the ocean floor, followed by runoff of oil and other chemicals through storm drains.

People who see a spill in the water can contact the Coast Guard's local office or call its national response center, said Salviati.

Residents can also volunteer in the event of a spill, according to panelists. Those who want to work with animals must be trained in advance, and can contact the Oiled Wildlife Care Network, which is funded by the state and run by UC Davis. Locally, residents can contact Volunteer San Diego.

With drilling platforms off the coast, and ships, trucks and pipelines carrying oil and gasoline, Lewis said, "They are incidents waiting to happen. Will they happen? We all hope not. The trick for us is to be ready whenever the 'when' is."

For information about the Oiled Wildlife Care Network, visit www.owcn.org. Volunteer San Diego's website is www.volunteersandiego.org