Land Letter
THE NATURAL RESOURCES WEEKLY REPORT

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## 1. S.F. BAY: Oil spill's larger implications come in waves *(11/15/2007)*

**Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor**

SAN FRANCISCO – The freighter Cosco Busan lays anchored in San Francisco Bay, ringed by spotlights in the turquoise evening. The ship, with a 90-foot-long gash set well above the water mark, has been impounded as investigators from three federal agency teams try to resolve the many unanswered questions about the Nov. 7 incident in which the Cosco Busan scraped a support tower of the Bay Bridge while trying to navigate through heavy fog. The collision ripped through the hull, quickly releasing some 58,000 gallons of fuel oil into the vulnerable bay ecosystem.

One week after the incident, the political ramifications appear to be outweighing the actual environmental impacts. To be sure, tens of thousands of gallons of heavy bunker oil remain floating in the bay or are still dispersing along the Pacific Coast north of the Golden Gate. About 718 birds have died from exposure to oil, with over 883 other oil birds captured for washing and rehabilitation.

The Cosco Buson oil spill from Nov. 7 has closed 27 beaches in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and interior parts of San Francisco Bay. Photo by Arthur O'Donnell.

Meanwhile, the political controversy is building over the U.S. Coast Guard's actions, its apparently delayed response and initial mischaracterization of the event as a small 140-gallon spill, and how cleanup resources were being deployed.

At the local level, the incident brought forth a surge of volunteers anxious to help with the cleanup effort – who found few meaningful roles as cleanup experts and trained wildlife handlers moved into action. The frustration of would-be volunteers led many to perform cleanup activities outside of formal, authorized channels.

Longer-term economic impacts also came in play, as Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) delayed the opening of commercial crab fishing season. The fishing ban was wholly endorsed by the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, which does not want to risk catching contaminated fish or crabs.

"We must protect public health and that is why I am signing this executive order today that will suspend harvesting of all marine life for human consumption in the areas affected by the spill. And we will continue to look at any other steps we need to take right now to protect the public and the Bay Area," said Schwarzenegger.

"Our priority must be getting the oil cleaned up as quickly as possible, rescuing all marine life and most importantly protecting the public health."

The suspension is for all fishing for human consumption in the areas affected by the oil spill beginning November 15, 2007, until December 1, 2007, or when the Department of Fish and Game and state health officials determine the fishing season can be opened.

Schwarzenegger, who had immediately declared a state emergency, initially refrained from criticizing the response or cleanup effort but on Tuesday declared it all "an unbelievable human failure."

### 'Heads have to roll'

As politicians from City Hall to Sacramento and Washington, D.C., called for investigations and handed out recriminations, the Coast Guard abruptly relieved the local incident commander of duty on Wednesday, replacing him with a veteran in ship

salvage and response.

Rear Adm. Craig Bone on Wednesday said that Capt. William Uberti, who had been heading up the federal onscene coordination effort, was being replaced by Capt. Paul Gugg. Bone declined to specify why Uberti was sacked, referring only to "a combination of events and my confidence in his ability to perform these duties."

Uberti returned to his regular job as San Francisco sector commander, Bone said.

The Coast Guard, which is in command of the spill cleanup and investigation, has come under heavy criticism for its handling of the incident, evidently waiting for several hours before notifying local officials and agencies of the extent of the spill, then disregarding offers of assistance from local agencies and a flood of citizen volunteers. Later in the week, members of the media expressed concerns that they were being given inaccurate information about events, such as the status of drug/alcohol testing of ship crew and officers.

Two other investigations are being conducted by the National Transportation Safety Board and the department of Justice, to see if any civil or criminal laws were violated.

In D.C., California's senior lawmakers became highly critical of the Coast Guard after a week of taking a more moderate approach. "Heads have to roll," said Sen. Barbara Boxer (D).

The replacement of Uberti with Gugg may assuage Boxer and Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D), but it won't likely signal any change in the current response plan. "Right now we're on the right track and I will continue on the track," Gugg said.

He had been briefed on the situation and toured the affected coastline by helicopter, Gugg said. "I saw very little oil in the water and great deployment of equipment. We'll stick to the team approach and we won't be gone until we're done," he said.

One thing he told reporters he will do is "do a better job telling you about the good things we're doing."

## Resource, wildlife impacts

While the pooling of oil varied by location, cleanup efforts shifted midweek from skimming the water surface to cleaning rocks and shores. More than 50 vessels were engaged in various skimming and monitoring activities and some 1,500 people – from state, local and federal agencies and contractors – were participating in the cleanup effort.

According to the Coast Guard, about 12,745 gallons of oil had been collected 580 gallons dispersed naturally; over 4,000 gallons had evaporated.

The oil sheen spread very rapidly through the Golden Gate and up the coastline of the Marin Headlands. Inside the bay, the greatest concentrations were seen around Angel Island and yellow boom lines ringed the coast off Crissy Field and other beaches of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. By midweek, 27 beaches remained closed, including all of Ocean Beach.

Steve Edinger, assistant chief of the California Department of Fish and Game, said that as of Wednesday afternoon, they had collected 863 oiled birds that were still alive and 718 dead birds, though not all had died because of contact with oil.

Crews have laid over 27,500 feet of yellow boomlines to contain the oil and prevent it from washing to shore, as seen here from Crissy Field near the Golden Gate Bridge. Photo by Arthur O'Donnell.

While most were common ducks, there was one marbled murrelet – listed on the Endangered Species List as threatened – brought in because it was coated with oil, Edinger said.

Also unusual was locating an oiled auklet out at the Farallon Islands, 28 miles west of the Golden Gate, Edinger said. But oil has not reached the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary, he said. The Farallon Islands attract hundreds of thousands of birds for breeding and are the largest colony south of Alaska.

So far, there have been no reports of adverse impacts on marine mammals, he added. Impacts on fish are uncertain this point.

Though concerned about the fact that this is the season for migrating waterfowl to fly though the bay area, Edinger said he