

Los Angeles Times

Protesters warn against using chemicals in Santa Barbara County oil spill clean-up



Concerned residents gather for a rally at the beach just south of the Santa Barbara oil spill site to call on Gov. Jerry Brown to ban fracking and other unconventional oil extraction methods that put California communities, the environment and natural resources at risk. (Christina House / For The Times)

By Emily Alpert Reyes and Javier Panzar
May 24, 2015

Dozens of protesters chanted “End Oil Now!” and hoisted signs alongside an inflatable mock pipeline on a Santa Barbara beach on Sunday, demanding an end to fracking and other forms of “extreme oil extraction” days after a spill sent thousands of gallons of oil into the ocean and onto beaches.

Environmental groups such as Food and Water Watch are also pressing for authorities to publicly

rule out the use of chemicals called dispersants in the cleanup of the spill near Refugio State Beach.

State Atty. Gen. and U.S. Senate candidate Kamala Harris, center, is briefed by Tyson Butzke, right, a superintendent with California State Parks, and Tom Cullen, left, of the Department of Fish and Wildlife, at Refugio State Beach on Thursday.

“This spill is so visible,” said Kassie Siegel, climate law institute director for the Center for Biological Diversity in Joshua Tree, “but so much of the damage that the oil companies do is harder to see.

“This is a tragic reminder that oil production is dirty and dangerous from start to finish,” Siegel said. She warned that chemical dispersants could make things worse by harming marine life and human health.

“Dolphins are still dying in the Gulf today because of these chemicals,” she added.

U.S. Coast Guard officials have said no chemical dispersants have been used in the cleanup, although they did not rule out using them in the future.

The rupture occurred on the inland side of U.S. 101 on Tuesday, spilling up to 105,000 gallons onto the coastal bluffs. An estimated 21,000 gallons ran down a culvert under the freeway and into the ocean.

Among the protesters out on Sunday were two high school students from Santa Clarita, Dana Bowers and Kayla Yonkers, who had driven up to the sullied beach to try to help with the cleanup, equipped with rubber boots, gloves, buckets and trash bags.

Refugio State Beach

Clean-up crews bag oil-stained sand and rocks Saturday at Refugio State Beach near Santa Barbara. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

The teens were turned away from Refugio State Beach and El Capitan State Beach before they headed south to Haskell's Beach, which remained open, and began picking globs of oil off the sand and rocks.

"A huge slick came in and the water was completely black," Yonkers said. At one point, they found a dead sea lion, she said.

Yet children were still playing nearby. Some people were venturing into the water, the teens said. The students said several officials approached them on the beach and told them it wasn't safe for them.

"But they didn't go up to the families telling their little children... They didn't tell them to get out of the water," Bowers said.

Many activists at the protest complained about being turned away from the cleanup, arguing that the official response had been slow and inadequate.

"If they don't want us on the beach, well they'd better start cleaning it up. Otherwise we're going out, we're gonna risk our health, because we risk our health by not cleaning it up," Tamlor Chase of the activist group End Oil Now told the crowd to cheers and applause.

The activists want Gov. Jerry Brown to ban hydraulic fracturing, acidizing and other controversial methods of oil extraction in California. After rallying on the beach near Stearns Wharf, the protesters planned to head to a nearby Coast Guard office to deliver a letter against using dispersants in the spill cleanup and then march to Santa Barbara City Hall.