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5 Animals Threatened by Exxon's Trucking Plan #EcoList of things we love

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While Americans are frightened and isolated by the coronavirus pandemic, the oil industry is moving ahead with big projects that threaten public health, imperiled species and the stability of our climate. One particularly alarming project is coming quickly and would endanger people and wildlife around Santa Barbara, Kern and San Luis Obispo Counties, onshore and offshore.

ExxonMobil wants to restart its three offshore-drilling platforms in the Santa Barbara Channel and truck 70 truckloads of oil per day, seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Those tanker trucks would travel up coastal Highway 101 and the hazardous single-lane Route 166.

So not only would Exxon's dirty and dangerous drilling rigs be brought back to life — they would also compound that risk by threatening motorists and townspeople with potentially explosive crashes.

Even before Exxon's proposal, these species were facing serious challenges to their survival. Oil spills, vehicle collisions and climate change impacts from Exxon's project will only compound the dangers they face.

Blunt-nosed Leopard Lizard — This charismatic, long-tailed reptile calls the San Joaquin Valley home, where much of Exxon's offshore oil would be transported. The species has experienced a population decline of almost 95% since the late 1800s.

Because of blunt-nosed leopard lizards' preference for lightly vegetated areas, they are commonly affected by vehicle strikes. The lizards have been shown to use roads and roadside ditches for habitat, especially in areas of dense grass cover, making them vulnerable to mortality in highly trafficked areas.

Highway 101 and Route 166, the proposed route for Exxon's oil-trucking proposal, are the main highways in California near blunt-nosed leopard lizard habitat. The high traffic of oil trucks, which may be traveling during times of low visibility, may strike several lizards over the course of their travel, harming their already small populations.

These lizards are also highly vulnerable to oil exposure, which can result in their deaths. Tanker trucks spill with alarming regularity, and according to 2016 truck-crash data, 60% of the hazardous materials released in crashes are flammable (including gasoline, fuel and oil). A single trucking accident could cause a roadside oil spill, exposing the lizard to oil and toxins.

Exxon's trucking proposal will also increase greenhouse gas emissions. Santa Barbara County's draft "environmental impact report" predicts 8,908 metric tons of greenhouse gas pollution from trucking and loading-rack activities alone — 8 times the threshold for annual greenhouse gas emissions. And that figure omits lifecycle emissions from drilling and processing the oil from Exxon's offshore platforms, as well as the ultimate combustion of the crude oil.

The blunt-nosed leopard lizard is highly threatened by climate change: Droughts have already caused a decline in the species' reproduction. Santa Barbara County is experiencing some of the fastest-rising temperatures in the United States. Additional greenhouse gas emissions from this project will exacerbate climate change impacts.

California Tiger Salamander — Like the blunt-nosed leopard lizard, the California tiger salamander is highly threatened by vehicle strikes and oil contamination. This salamander's populations in Santa Barbara County are listed as endangered and have been whittled down by urban development and vehicle traffic.

These dotted amphibians are highly mobile between breeding and non-breeding areas, making them susceptible to vehicle strikes. They migrate en masse to their breeding areas in ponds. Several breeding ponds exist near Exxon's trucking proposal including on Highway 101 in Los Alamos.

In addition, because the primary breeding habitat for the California tiger salamander is ponds, an oil spill would significantly threaten their reproduction, too. Their highly permeable skin quickly absorbs substances, so an oil spill near one of the several breeding ponds could put reproductive-aged individuals at risk.

San Joaquin Kit Fox — Have you ever imagined what a chihuahua-fox mix would look like? Meet the San Joaquin kit fox, one of the smallest foxes in North America. These big-eared, bushy-tailed foxes are native to the San Joaquin Valley, as their name suggests, where they've historically inhabited grassland, scrubland and wetland communities. Recent developments in the valley have contributed to loss of this habitat, and the population has declined by more than 30% since the 1930s.

Several roads have fragmented San Joaquin kit fox habitat, increasing the risk of vehicle strikes. This species is most active at night, when roads are dark and collisions with wildlife are frequent. Given that Exxon's trucking proposal would put 70 tanker trucks a day, 24 days a week, seven days a week on local highways for several years, more vehicle strikes may occur.

Southern California Coast Steelhead — Southern California coast steelhead are resilient fish. They have adapted to arid California conditions and spend much of their lives in the ocean, migrating inland to spawn.

Before Lake Cachuma was built, the Santa Ynez River was home to more than 30,000 steelhead a year; that number now hovers around 200. Santa Barbara County is significant in maintaining genetic diversity in the steelhead populations: Scientists believe that the population found south of the Santa Maria River may be the ancestral line for northern populations.

The proposed trucking route crosses steelhead critical habitat at the Canada del Refugio, Arroyo Hondo, Canada San Onofre, Santa Ynez River and Santa Maria River (See map below). It also travels adjacent to the Canada de la Gaviota for 4.5 miles. A single trucking accident could result in an oil spill in this important habitat. Oil spills and the resulting uptake of hydrocarbons by the fish can have life-threatening consequences for this species.

Southern Sea Otter — Belly-floating, big-eyed sea otters are also threatened by Exxon's trucking proposal. In 2019 the population of these cute critters was estimated at only 2,962 individuals.

A tanker truck spill, or a spill from one of Exxon's three offshore platforms, could have dire effects on sea otter populations in California. Reports have indicated that Exxon's offshore drilling platforms are aging and corroded, increasing chances of a potential spill.

Oil from one of those platforms could quickly spread throughout the marine environment. A land-based spill, such as from a tanker truck accident, could affect several of the waterways that enter the Pacific Ocean, near or in Southern Sea Otter critical habitat (See map above). US 101 north of Refugio Road has a statistically higher collision rate than the statewide average — and it's just 800 feet away from the water.

Sea otters are extremely vulnerable to oil spills. Contact with crude oil can irritate the interdigital webbing of hind flippers and destroy membranes around the eyes, nose, mouth and other tissues.

The air layer between their fur and skin, which keeps the animals warm, is eliminated when a sea otter accidentally spreads oil across his or her body during a grooming session.

This air layer provides for 70% of the insulating properties of the otters' fur, so a sea otter in an oil spill can quickly suffer symptoms of hypothermia, which may lead to death.