

Los Angeles Times 2/8/90

Tanker Spills Oil Off O.C. Coast

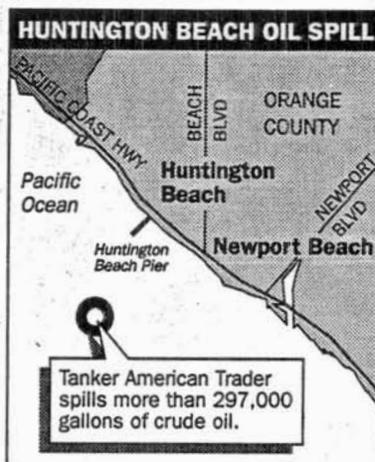
■ **Disaster:** A tanker disgorged an estimated 297,100 gallons of crude. Crews raced to contain the Southland's largest spill since the 1969 Santa Barbara catastrophe.

By STEVEN R. CHURM
TIMES STAFF WRITER

HUNTINGTON BEACH—An estimated 297,100 gallons of crude oil spilled into the ocean on Wednesday night after an oil tanker punctured its own hull, apparently with its anchor, while attempting to moor about two miles off Huntington Beach.

The spill, termed the largest off the Southern California coast since the devastating 1969 Santa Barbara disaster, prompted a massive cleanup effort by crews racing rising tides and high surf to contain the slick and protect miles of beaches.

By midnight, the slick was 1.5 miles long and 400 yards wide but had not yet washed ashore. Early today, an offshore wind was pushing the oil from the 800-foot-long American Trader out to sea, rather



Los Angeles Times

than toward the beaches, life-guards said. Marine biologists on the beach even reported that the winds were speeding the evaporation of the oil.

Booms were put in place to seal off the most environmentally sensitive areas along the Orange County coast, including Anaheim Bay—the entrance to Huntington Harbour—the Bolsa Chica wetlands north of Huntington Beach, the Santa Ana River mouth and Newport Harbor.

The tanker, operated by British Petroleum, had come to California from Valdez, Alaska. It left its

More on Oil Spill

- **WORST FEARS**—Oil spill. The two dirty words that all California beach lovers have come to despise. **A14**
- **CLEANUP**—The Coast Guard, tanker owners and an oil industry spill-control team race to keep more than 250,000 gallons of crude oil from the shore. **A14**
- **WHAT HAPPENED**—An illustrated view of where the accident occurred. **A14**
- **AUTHORITIES REACT**—Officials respond with concern and anger. **A15**
- **IMPACT**—Whatever the spill's final size, the political consequences may exceed its environmental impact. **A15**

Long Beach anchorage about 1 p.m. and headed to Huntington Beach, where it was to moor off-shore and unload its cargo of crude overnight through underwater pipelines to the mainland.

Sanford Schmidt, president of New York-based American Trading Transportation Co. in New York, which owns the tanker, said it appears that the vessel "struck her anchor sitting on the bottom."

"There is not all that much water out there," he said, adding that a swell apparently lifted the

Please see **SPILL**, A14

Los Angeles Times 2-8-90



Los Angeles Times 2/8/90

SPILL: Crews Race to Contain Widening Slick

Continued from A1

tanker up as it attempted to moor and when it came down, "it hit the anchor" and punctured the hull.

"By any measure, it is a large spill," said Coast Guard Lt. Vincent Campos.

Edd Fong, a spokesman for the State Lands Commission, which monitors oil exploration in coastal waters, called Wednesday's spill one of the largest off the coast of California since the Santa Barbara spill in 1969. That spill involved 3.2 million gallons of crude oil.

Reaction to the incident was swift. State Controller Gray Davis, chairman of the State Lands Commission, flew to the scene Wednesday night while Huntington Beach officials declared a city emergency. And Orange County Board of Supervisors Chairman Don R. Roth signed an emergency declaration and sent it Gov. George Deukmejian overnight for his approval.

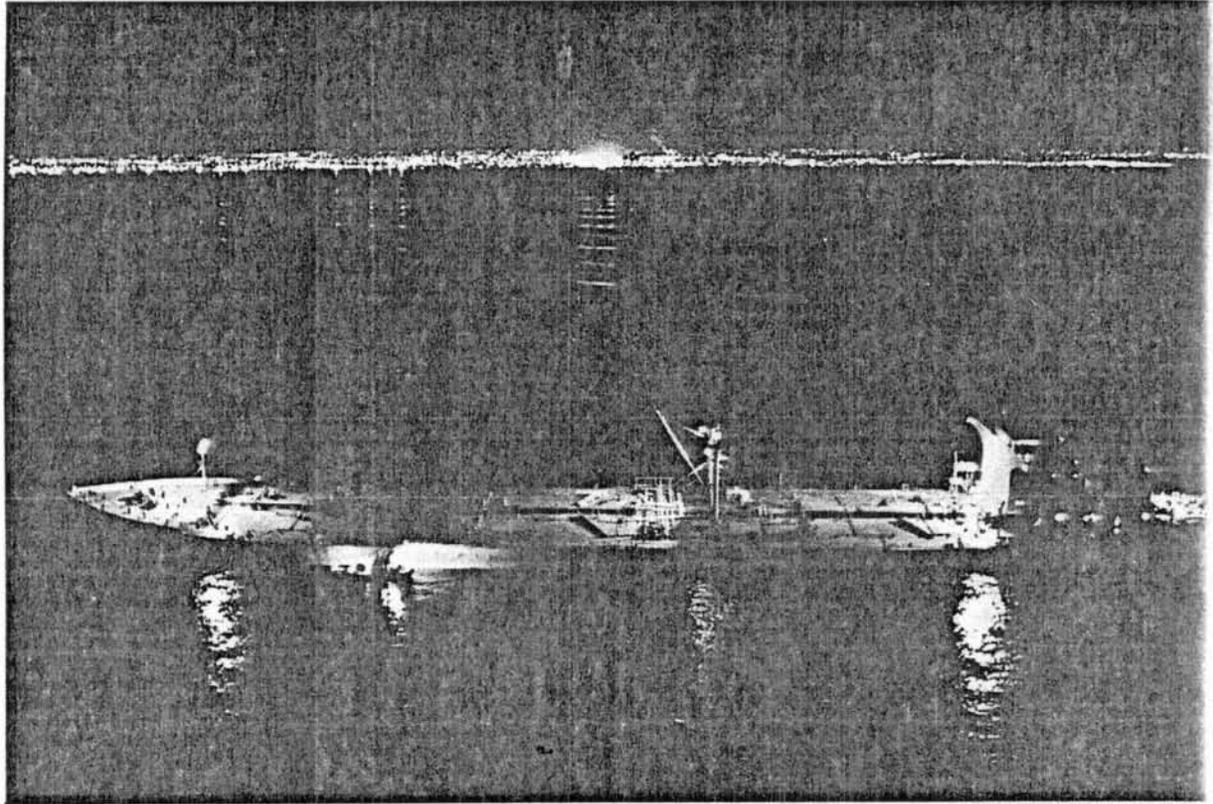
"This kind of craziness has to stop," said Bob Hattoy, Southern California regional director of the Sierra Club. "We've seen these accidents from Alaska to Delaware . . . and now here. It just proves that oil and coastal waters don't mix."

As news of the spill spread, dozens of people telephoned Huntington Beach authorities volunteering to help clean birds and other wildlife. By early today, several oil-coated birds had been rescued and brought to a makeshift treatment center on the sand just south of the city pier. Volunteers were washing the birds, including ducks, grebes and cormorants, with dish soap.

The spill took place off one of California's most heavily used beaches. Millions flock every summer to the nine miles of state and city beaches and about 1.5 million tourists a year strolled the old Huntington Beach pier before it shut down after a violent 1988 winter storm. Planning is under way for construction of a new pier next summer.

At midnight, onlookers who had gathered on the beach were asked by lifeguards to leave.

Initial containment efforts were centered on the bow of the tanker where the hull was leaking. About 1,200 feet of boom material—an orange-colored, thick vinyl sheet about two feet high with weights



DAVID MURONAKA / Los Angeles Times

The American Trader lies off the coast leaking oil, backed by lights from the Huntington Beach shoreline. Oil was expected to hit land overnight

er's captain and crew were ordered to remain on board the vessel for questioning. In addition, those piloting the tanker at the time of the accident will be tested for drugs and alcohol under a new federal requirement that went into effect in December. The measure stems from the grounding of the Exxon Valdez, the U.S. tanker that dumped more than 11 million gallons of crude oil into Alaska's Prince William Sound a year ago in one of worst ecological disasters ever.

Present at the Huntington Beach meeting were Mayor Thomas J. Mays and council members Grace Winchell, Peter M. Green and Jim Silva.

a c1

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Cont. from previous page

Los Angeles Times 2/8/90
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PREVIOUS MAJOR SPILLS

Previous big oil spills in California and U.S. coastal waters:

March, 1989—In the largest oil spill in U.S. history, 10.92 million gallons poured into Prince William Sound in Alaska when the Exxon Valdez hit a reef.

April, 1988—About 365,000 gallons of oil spilled from a storage tank in Martinez and flowed into San Francisco Bay and the environmentally sensitive Suisun Marsh.

November, 1985—An exploratory well blew out off Texas, spilling 6.3 million gallons.

July, 1984—2.8 million gallons of oil spilled after a ship ran aground in Louisiana.

October, 1984—2 million gallons spilled off San Francisco when a ship caught fire after an explosion.

November, 1979—More than 10 million gallons of oil burned or spilled when two ships collided off Texas.

January, 1969—More than 3 million gallons of oil spilled into the Santa Barbara Channel, covering 800 square miles of water and 100 miles of beaches with tar and killing thousands of shore birds.

Source: Golob's Oil Pollution Bulletin and Times staff.

attached to the bottom—was placed around the bow.

From a cleanup standpoint, said Coast Guard Capt. James C. Card, it would be better if the oil did wash ashore rather than stay in the ocean, where calm coastal waters would make it difficult to disperse.

The Huntington Beach City Council held an emergency meeting at 9:15 p.m. to declare a state of emergency in the city. A declaration was sent to Deukmejian, saying that local resources were insufficient to cope with the situation.

At a press conference, the Coast Guard's Card said a "full investigation" into the incident had been launched. Card would not speculate on what caused the spill, but said it was "possible the anchor punched a hole in the hull."

"It hit something underwater, whether a pipeline or the anchor," he said. "There is no shoal down there or anything else. It hit something that is not natural or on the charts."

Card said the spilled oil came from the tanker's No. 1 and No. 2 starboard cargo tanks, which contained 6,000 barrels. The tanker's owner said the oil was bound for Golden West Refinery in Santa Fe Springs.

"We have confidence that the situation is under control," Green said. "It seems there is little likelihood that the oil will get into the coastal wetlands, but if it does, it will be devastating to thousands of birds."

Environmentalists began preparing for wildlife damage immediately. Vic Leipzig, executive director of Los Amigos de Bolsa Chica, set up facilities at Lake Street and Pacific Coast Highway to clean birds.

The county mobilized its Emergency Operations Center in the basement of the county finance building in Santa Ana.

Health officials were to inspect county beaches at dawn today to determine if any should be closed because of the oil contamination.

Coast Guard officials received the first report of the spill from the U.S.-registered American Trader about 4:30 p.m. As darkness fell, emergency teams descended on the scene, but moderate swells made initial efforts to surround the slick with booms difficult, officials said.

A Coast Guard strike team, an oil-industry cleanup contractor and a federal pollution-response team responded to the damaged tanker southwest of Beach Boulevard off Huntington State Beach. Local and county fire department and lifeguard crews also immediately began monitoring shoreline from Newport Beach to Seal Beach for oil damage.

Fearing such a calamity, a coalition of county environmentalists, city officials and residents have long opposed proposals to allow oil and gas exploration off the Orange County coast. Even a majority of the county's Republican congressional delegation broke ranks in the 1980s with then-President Ronald Reagan over the issue, warning that a major spill posed a threat to coastal tourism, one of the region's major industries.

The state congressional delegation learned of the spill at a Wednesday night dinner in Washington. Rep. C. Christopher Cox (R-Newport Beach), whose district includes several miles of coast, promised that "all existing resources" would be employed for the cleanup. Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Lomita) said the accident was further evidence that "tankers are a very risky way of transporting" oil. Rohrabacher's district stretches from Huntington Beach to the Palos Verdes Peninsula.

To contain the slick, Skip Onstead, manager of Clean Seas—the oil-spill cooperative that handles such disasters between Santa Barbara and Point Dume—dispatched a 130-foot oil-spill recovery vessel to the scene. Onstead told The Times that the accident is classified as a "major spill." The cleanup vessel, Mr. Clean II, carries a

Los Angeles Times 2/8/90

SPILL: Oil Tanker Ruptures Off Coast

Continued from A14

asked for our help and we're sending one of our vessels. It will be there [this] morning," he said.

Two booms were placed around the ship and the slick, but some of the oil escaped containment.

Schmidt, whose company owns six ships including the American Trader, said the tanker and its captain, Robert Laware, have good safety records, and the firm had never been involved in a spill as large as Wednesday's.

"We have certainly never been involved in a spill like this,"

Schmidt said. "We have had some minor problems, but nothing like this. Unfortunately, we don't know a lot about this right now, but it is happenstance, not anything negligent."

According to American Trading, the company is sending an oil-spill team to Huntington Beach to help

in cleanup operations and damage assessments. Schmidt said the company would be responsible for paying for the cost of the cleanup and any property damage.

At Huntington State Beach, lifeguard dispatcher Renee Field said that lifeguards and emergency personnel were bracing for the worst as a six-knot wind pushed the slick toward shore.

"We know it's probably going to hit our beach," she said. "It's a 99% chance, come morning, we will close the beach. But there's nothing we can do."

At nearby Bolsa Chica State Beach, lifeguard Greg Scott said officials there were taking a "wait-and-see attitude" before launching any preventive projects.

"We can't see it at this point; we can't react until we have more information," he said.

The tanker had been scheduled

to return this morning to the Atlantic Richfield Terminal at Berth 77 in Long Beach. The ship arrived in Long Beach on Jan. 29 from the port of Valdez, carrying more than 560,000 barrels of oil.

Contributing to the stories on the oil spill off Huntington Beach were Times staff writers Eric Bailey, Jim Carlton, Steven R. Churm, Shelby Grad, Jerry Hicks, Lanie Jones, Patrick Lee, Eric Lichtblau, Davan Maharaj, Maria Newman, Rose Ellen O'Connor, Dana Parsons, Bob Schwartz, Larry B. Stammer, Dan Weikel, Chris Woodyard and Nancy Wride.