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Oil spills into S.F. Bay south of Bay Bridge

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The severity of the second toxic fuel spill to hit San Francisco Bay in two years remained unknown Friday, but as a large plume of oil headed for shore, questions were being asked about the speed of the response.

The 6:48 a.m. spill occurred 2 1/2 miles south of the Bay Bridge as bunker fuel was being pumped into the Panamanian tanker Dubai Star, sending emergency crews scrambling to contain an oil slick that was at least 3 miles long by Friday evening - and spreading.

Several observers said there was a long gap between the time the spill was first reported and the time booms were placed around the ship.

"Four hours after reports of bunker oil spilling into the bay (Friday) morning, boom equipment had not yet been deployed," said Jackie Dragon, the marine sanctuaries program director for nonprofit group Pacific Environment. "Why is this so?"

Coast Guard officials said the ship's officers and emergency response crews acted as quickly as they could.

Amount spilled uncertain

Investigators said they will not know how much oil was spilled until soundings and measurements are taken of the ship's fuel tanks, but San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom and other officials estimated Friday that a few thousand gallons leaked out.

Patrol boats, oil skimmers, utility boats and helicopters were deployed and 11,000 feet of boom was laid, but the thick black oil was still threatening to wash ashore. The Coast Guard warned that oil could start washing up along north Alameda Island, Bay Farm Island in Alameda, Yerba Buena Island and Treasure Island overnight.

By Friday night, emergency workers had found no evidence of oil on birds or other wildlife. But a helicopter hovering over the spill earlier in the day reported seeing birds diving into the oil slick, said Sylvia Wright, a spokeswoman for the Oiled Wildlife Care Network, which has been mobilized to do reconnaissance and recovery of oiled birds and other wildlife.

"We do expect that there will be birds that need to be rescued," Wright said. She said birds are nearly at the peak of their migration south, meaning nearly 300,000 shorebirds are now in the Bay Area.

State and federal officials were trying to determine whether the spill was caused by mechanical failure, human

error or both. Coast Guard officials said their initial assessment points to mechanical failure.

The Dubai Star, a Panamanian-flagged vessel owned by South Harmony Shipping Inc. of Panama, was carrying light jet fuel as cargo. It was propulsion fuel, not the ship's cargo, that spilled during the fueling operation.

After realizing what had happened, the ship's crew shut off the source of the spill, officials said, but the oil had already spilled onto the tanker's deck and poured into the water, where it was drifting with the current.

There was no fog and very little wind to hamper the response, but the tides were about to shift.

When the spill occurred, the tide was coming into the bay, moving south. The sheen traveled about 4 miles in that direction before it began moving north and east.

The shifting current was why containment booms needed to be set out earlier than mid-morning, several hours after the spill, said Marcie Keever, the clean vessels campaign director for environmental advocacy group Friends of the Earth.

"It's important to have this equipment on board, for the vessels to be sent out immediately," she said. "Every second counts."

Coast Guard Capt. Paul Gugg said the Dubai Star's crew quickly notified authorities, including Marine Spill Response Corp., a nonprofit oil spill removal organization. He said it took four hours to completely encircle the ship with booms and contain the immediate spill area, but a great deal of other work was also being done.

The Coast Guard sent out skimming vessels and five boats equipped with booms to protect environmentally sensitive areas. Marine Spill Response crews in three other vessels also laid thousands of feet of booms in an attempt to limit the damage.

Two vessels from the National Response Corp., a company the Coast Guard contracted to clean up the spill, were also working to contain the oil.

"The notifications to the people who are conducting the cleanup were made very quickly," said Senior Chief Petty Officer Keith Alholm. "The tanker crew itself enacted their vessel response plan immediately, notifying the Coast Guard. They did their best to secure the incident."

Newsom said during an early afternoon press conference that as much as 40 percent of the oil had been contained. That information was not confirmed.

Smaller spill

State, federal and local officials stressed that this spill was much smaller and the response time was much faster than the Cosco Busan spill almost two years ago.

The container ship Cosco Busan sideswiped the Bay Bridge on Nov. 7, 2007, spilling more than 50,000 gallons of the same kind of fuel oil into the bay. That spill created an uproar after miscommunication and foot-dragging

allowed time for strong bay currents to disperse the sludge and foul beaches throughout the Bay Area. Some 2,400 birds were killed and the spill cost about $70 million to clean up.

"There are some similarities (to 2007) - the type of fuel is about the same," Gugg said, "but that's where they end."

Still, very little information was being released about the size and scope of the spill or the timing of the response.

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