

SAVING SEABIRDS FROM SLIMY GOO MORRO BAY OIL SPILL RESPONSE DRILL

THE EXERCISE SIMULATES A MYSTERY SPILL AT AVILA BEACH WITH 'BIRDS' CARED FOR AT PACIFIC WILDLIFE CARE CENTER

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More than 25 volunteers, veterinarians and state officials converged on Morro Bay on Tuesday for the first oil spill response drill at the new Pacific Wildlife Care triage center.

The drill simulated a spill at Avila Beach that coated dozens of seabirds with oil. Working with state Department of Fish and Game officials and the Oiled Wildlife Care Network, about a dozen local volunteers practiced mobilizing and activating the wildlife hospital's oil spill response center.

Teams in white hazmat suits used hunting decoys to practice stabilizing oiled birds, then evaluated them and scrubbed off the oil -- just as they would in a real emergency, said Michael Ziccardi, network director.

The Oiled Wildlife Care Network, headquartered at UC Davis, has 12 branches in the state, including the Morro Bay location.

It holds one or two drills a year at each site. "We learn something new every time," Ziccardi said. Under the drill scenario, Avila Beach residents report numerous oiled birds hauling themselves from the water onto the shore.

There is no oil slick or other obvious source of the oil.

"It's a mystery spill," Ziccardi said. "That's what we most commonly deal with." In the event of a real emergency, a specialized spill-response trailer would be deployed to Avila Beach.

Birds would be medically evaluated in the trailer before being shuttled to the triage center in Morro Bay for cleanup.

Earlier this year, Pacific Wildlife Care opened a hospital behind the Morro Bay power plant. It includes a 96-foot flight cage for recovering birds.

Caption for photos no longer available from Times Tribune: