

On Bay Area beaches, picking up one oily glob at a time messy going

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Black goop was everywhere on San Francisco beaches, and public-spirited folks were on their hands and knees, scraping it into glass jars and plastic sacks.

It was messy and smelly work, and it wrecked more than one pair of pants, but it's what big-hearted people do after oil spills.

"I already got a lot of it on my feet," said Neeki Pizziconi of San Francisco, who was scuttling along the shoreline at Ocean Beach just south of the Cliff House on Friday, armed with two plastic gloves and a bunch of supermarket grocery bags.

She was not part of an environmental group or volunteer outfit. She was not a card-carrying member of anything, she said. She just grabbed some white sacks and headed for the beach, like a handful of other do-gooders.

"I should be in my drawing class right now," she said. "But this is more important."

The hardest part was making sure the goo ended up in the bags instead of on her. Silver-dollar-size blobs of smelly tar dot the waterline, and once touched by body or clothing, the stuff does not come off easily, if it comes off at all.

Pizziconi said she would be scrubbing her feet for a long time, but that it was better for the goop to be on her than on a bird.

"I guess no good deed goes unpunished, as they say," she mused as she rubbed sand on her feet, which accomplished nothing except to give the tar something to stick to.

Nearby, a team from the U.S. Geological Survey was collecting the globs, sticking them into screw-top jars and labeling each glob.

"We're trying to determine the extent of the spill rather than point fingers," said marine geochemist Bob Rosenbauer, who was leading a team of four volunteers on a tour of San Francisco beaches.

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They snagged two globs at Ocean Beach, and some of it ended up on Rosenbauer's pants, in the name of science.

"These are my tar-gathering pants," Rosenbauer said. "They didn't start out that way, but they are now. This stuff isn't coming off."

Based on his quick survey, Ocean Beach appeared to be in much better shape than Baker Beach, which was a mess. Rangers had closed it off to visitors, along with China Beach, and a National Park Service guard in a pickup truck was ordering rubberneckers to leave.

Baker Beach and the area near Marina Green, said Rosenbauer, were "severely impacted," while Ocean Beach was "maybe not quite as bad overall." The large yellow floating booms that have been placed in the water near the ecologically sensitive Crissy Field wetlands seem to be doing their job in keeping the goop away, Rosenbauer said.

The geochemist said he would analyze the jars of goop in his lab in Menlo Park, even though he already knows the tar came from the hole in the side of the Cosco Busan. He hopes to find out more about the movement of spilled oil - how far, how fast and how much.

At Crissy Field, the promenade was open to pedestrians but the beach itself was shut, although the Coast Guard reopened it later in the day. Dog-walkers were keeping their dogs on leashes, to prevent them from romping in the tar.

"This is not nice, it's not pretty and I never thought it would happen in my own backyard," said Terry Picon, who was walking a poodle named Jet Black.


Also on a tight rein was a Labradoodle named Timmy, who was being walked by his owner, Sandra Quigley. She said that all the yellow plastic strands - the portable booms designed to keep the oily water off the beach - resembled police tape.

"It looks like a crime scene around here, and I guess that's what it is," Quigley said.

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