

Contra Costa supervisors revise response plan for future spills

Christopher Heredia, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Contra Costa officials, critical of the response to the Nov. 7 San Francisco Bay oil spill, will attack cleanup of oil-tarnished beaches more quickly in the future under a revised spill-response plan that county supervisors approved Tuesday.

Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond presented a plan that could result in county and city workers and volunteers being trained in advance to respond more quickly to future hazardous spills in the waterways of the East Bay.

The county will also seek greater decision-making power in deploying cleanup workers.

In Richmond, environmental groups and city officials criticized the official responders - the Coast Guard and contractors for the Cosco Busan container ship - for being slow to respond as oil from the spill moved toward the city's shores.

State and federal rules that require cleanup workers to go through a 24-hour hazardous materials class kept Good Samaritans from reaching beaches and shorelines in a timely manner, critics said.

"The contractors for the Cosco Busan didn't deploy workers to our shores until many days after the incident," Gioia said. "Our office of emergency personnel was telling us there were 1,000 cleanup workers in Marin and San Francisco and none in Contra Costa. Now we see their forces out, and I'm not sure how efficient they are. Many are standing around, others are picking up trash. It's really too little, too late.

"I believe if we all carry through with this plan, we will have a trained, ready force of public employees and citizens ready for next time," Gioia added.

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The county will join with other local jurisdictions to seek damages from the Cosco Busan owners for loss of shoreline access during the cleanup and damage to the environment and wildlife.

Gioia said he will also work with other government agencies and East Bay refineries to determine whether shipping channels and turning basins should be deepened and widened to reduce the risk of ships running aground or into bridges. The county also will create a list of sensitive shorelines to provide to cleanup crews handling future spills.

Nancy Powell, a bird rescuer from Albany, was among the East Bay residents to criticize the slow response from cleanup crews contracted with the owners of the Cosco Busan, particularly in Richmond.

“I think that’s fantastic,” Powell said of the supervisors’ plan, which will take effect early next year. “One of the huge problems with the response to this spill was the lack of local control.

“This was a huge wake-up call,” Powell said, adding that she believes residents will be eager to participate in future volunteer training.

Powell and several of her friends took matters into their own hands after the spill. Donning protective suits and gloves, they collected 40 oiled birds from beaches in the East Bay and took them to the bird rescue center in Cordelia. “This spill isn’t over,” she said. “It’s going to continue fouling the environment and wildlife.”

Powell and Gioia praised county hazardous material crews for responding quickly but said their efforts would have been enhanced were it not for bureaucratic delays from the unified command.

Gioia said the county may ask refineries to pay for the cost of training county and city workers and volunteers.

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Note: Supervisor Gioia’s recommendations on next page

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TO: BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
FROM: JOHN GIOIA
DATE: November 27, 2007
SUBJECT: Recommendations arising out of Cosco Busan Oil Spill

My recommendations are based on the considerable amount of time I have spent talking with other agency representatives and shoreline volunteers, having attended the Assembly Committee on Natural Resources Hearing (on November 15) and the U.S. House of Representatives Congressional Hearing (on November 19), and my personal observations living on San Francisco Bay along the Richmond shoreline/Meeker Slough area and observing the daily response along the shoreline.

It is especially important that we use the experience from this oil spill to insure that we are fully prepared in the event of a more major oil spill caused by oil tankers transiting through narrow channels to or from one of the five oil refineries along the Contra Costa and Solano County shorelines.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Advocate for changes in protocols for emergency response to oil spills and other disasters to give local public agencies (without increased liability) greater authority to make decisions over how to deploy local resources and personnel. Existing federal regulations and protocols for oil spills relegate local public safety leadership to only a “liaison” role in responding to an oil spill. This practice plus the bureaucratic unified command structure resulted in delays in bringing local resources to bear in responding to the oil spill. In the first few days after the spill, the shipping company’s local contractor had clean-up crews in Marin and San Francisco Counties only, leaving the Alameda and Contra Costa County shoreline lacking the necessary personnel to provide early cleanup.

RECOMMENDATION 2

The County, through its OES and Hazardous Materials Division, should work with the cities in Contra Costa County to establish hazardous materials training programs in order to allow volunteers to be trained in advance so there is a pre-trained group that may respond immediately in the event of a future oil spill. Hundreds of people showed up at Department of Fish and Game meetings throughout the Bay Area (including Richmond) prepared to assist in the rescue and cleaning of oiled birds but were told they were not needed. Despite this, many frustrated and well-meaning volunteers worked along the shoreline to rescue birds and take them to the cleaning center in Cordelia. Consult with the San Francisco Office of Emergency Services about the “volunteer management agreement” that they recently negotiated with federal authorities that allows local citizens to be trained and deployed to assist with recovery from the oil spill.

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RECOMMENDATION 3

The County, working with the cities in Contra Costa County, should review and update the list and location of sensitive shoreline areas to insure that all areas needing immediate protective actions and remediation are fully identified.

Public agency personnel occasionally needed directions from local residents to find unnamed or harder to access shoreline areas. Some sensitive shoreline areas are not named and not as commonly known and need to be clearly identified so responders can get to them quickly. In some cases, beach and shoreline areas were not closed because of lack of local knowledge about where they were used and which agency had control. For example, due to lack of signage, some dog walkers at Pt. Isabel Regional Shoreline were unaware of the restriction on entering the bay, and dogs were contaminated with oil after swimming.

RECOMMENDATION 4

The Board of Supervisors Transportation, Water and Infrastructure should conduct a full review of: (1) the need to deepen or widen any shipping channels or turning basins along its shoreline (in San Francisco Bay, San Pablo Bay, Carquinez Strait, Suisun Bay) used by oil tankers transiting to the five local oil refineries, (2) the navigational safety procedures for these oil tankers.

The County has aggressively sought federal funding for these types of projects in the past. However, one such project was not constructed, after federal funds were identified, because of liability issues. The County asked the oil refinery to assume liability during the construction of the project, but it refused.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Contra Costa County will work with other appropriate public agencies to identify where restitution from the shipping company is appropriate for damages caused by the spill. This may include destruction/damage to wildlife and habitat, reduced public access to the shoreline, and cost

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