

Avoiding THE BIG SPILL: Large vessel traffic along California's Coast (Updated 3/12/08)

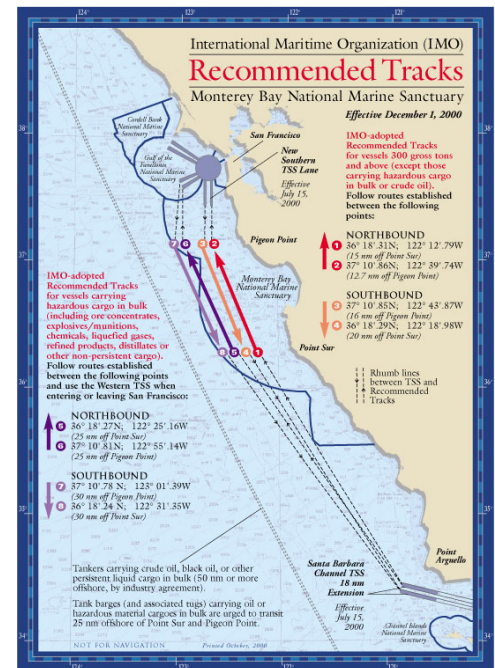
A large oil spill remains the biggest threat to California's sea otter population. If a large spill occurs the entire sea otter population could be wiped out along with thousands of birds, seals, sea lions, and whales. Impacts from Alaska's 1989 Exxon Valdez 10.8 million gallon spill are still being felt decades after the spill: thousands of otters were killed (a number greater than the entire CA otter population) and the population has still not recovered. The spill drifted 470 miles, soiling 1,100 miles of Alaskan shoreline (The entire length of CA is 770 miles).

There is evidence that some large ships may be transiting the California Coast haphazardly. An organized system of vessel traffic lanes will reduce the risk of a catastrophic vessel collision and oil spill.

A collision between two large vessels - tankers or cargo ships - has occurred many times before and can certainly happen again. As the recent Cosco Busan 58,000 gallon spill in San Francisco Bay showed, ship captains are willing to push their ships through terrible conditions to make their next delivery. The sea otter range lies amidst an ocean shipping highway that traverses up and down the Pacific coast. Many of these ships transit between some of the nations busiest ports: Los Angeles (1st), Long Beach (2nd) and Oakland (4th). Many of these shipping companies face critical commercial pressures to deliver their goods as quickly as possible. Their ships travel very fast with -- at best -- secondary consideration of the marine ecosystems they traverse through. The ship congested waters offshore California have a history of ship collisions including the 1971 collision of two Standard Oil tankers just outside California's Golden Gate spilling 900,000 gallons of crude. As trade with China and Asia increases, California will see ever increasing ship traffic.

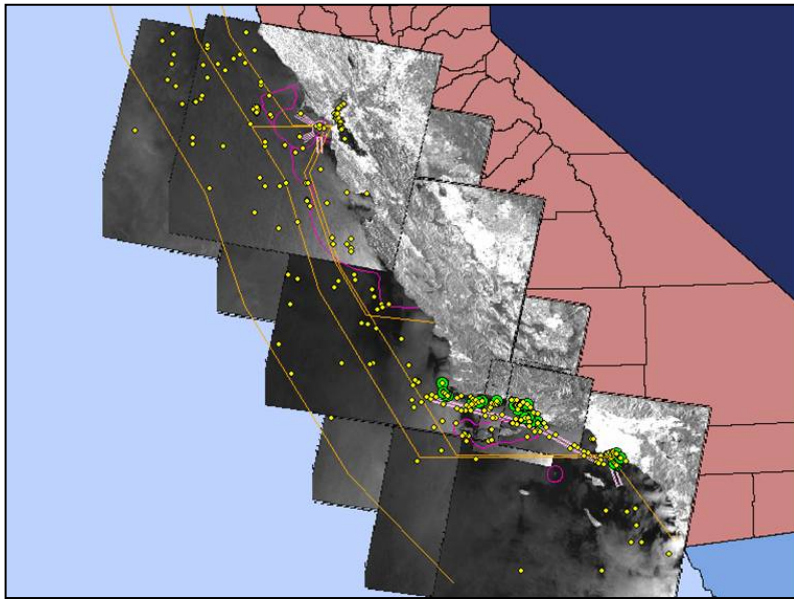
In 1998-99, in an effort facilitated by the US Coast Guard and Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, a small group of industry representatives and stakeholders (including The Otter Project), agreed upon measures and routings to best avoid ship collisions. The International Maritime Organization (IMO), a branch of the UN, adopted these *voluntary* routings in 2000. These shipping tracks are defined by distance from the shore at critical places along the coast (Pigeon Point, Point Sur, and Point Arguello). Tankers are required to travel in federal and international waters, at least 50 nautical miles from shore, and tank barges carrying oil or hazardous substances are required to travel at least 25 nautical miles from shore. Northbound container ships follow one lane and southbound ships follow another, 15 and 20 miles offshore Point Sur respectively.

When ships enter the San Francisco Bay and the Santa Barbara Channel, they begin to follow a system referred to as a Traffic Separation Scheme (TSS) that regulates where each ship should go when it begins to enter a port. In many ways the TSS system is to ocean transport as air traffic control is to air transport. It is mandatory for ships to follow the TSS system. However, when ships travel between the San Francisco TSS and the Santa Barbara TSS, they only voluntarily follow the lanes designated for them by the IMO. The dangers of this system are obvious -- it's equivalent to flying a plane from San Francisco to LAX without any flight plan!



The 1998-2000 vessel traffic measures are mandated by Congress in order to protect the sea otter and the environmental resources of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary. Section 102(d) of Public Law 102-368 and section 2203(d) of the National Marine Sanctuaries Program Amendments Act of 1992 (Public Law 102-587) mandate that "the Secretary of Commerce and the Secretary of Transportation, in consultation with the State of California and with adequate opportunity for public comment, shall report to Congress on measures for regulating vessel traffic in the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary if such measures are necessary to protect sanctuary resources."

Anecdotal evidence seems to indicate that many large ships are not within the vessel traffic lanes and are not abiding by the recommended IMO routings. Fishermen have consistently reported ships far within 15 miles off Point Sur. Shipping containers lost from the deck of a container ship have been found in the Monterey Submarine Canyon, inshore of the lanes. Among



the most compelling evidence is a research exercise conducted by the Department of Fish and Game (for unrelated purposes), in which they collected and collated 14 satellite images over a six week period (Dec '04 - Jan '05). 420 large ship 'targets' were detected. The composite image is shown to the left. The ships appear to be distributed randomly; with little or no regard for the lanes. If large ships were in the lanes, we would expect to see a more organized distribution (as appears to be the case within the Santa Barbara Channel).

In the advent of heightened pressures from globalization to send and deliver goods faster than ever before, the marine ecosystems of the Monterey Bay face even greater threats from large vessels as they cut corners and fail to follow the lanes designated by the IMO in a rush to get to the next port. So far, the effectiveness and compliance of recommended tracks is unknown.

We believe that the U.S. Coast Guard, Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, and CDFG-OSPR have the responsibility to conduct a more comprehensive study to determine the level of compliance with the IMO-recommended tracks. We further believe that the State of California or Congress should designate funds for such a study. If large ships are not within the IMO recommended tracks, California, the Coast Guard, and Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary should request that the IMO make the tracks mandatory. Mandatory vessel traffic lanes will reduce the risk of vessel collision and more fully protect the resources and coastal economy of the California and the United States.

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