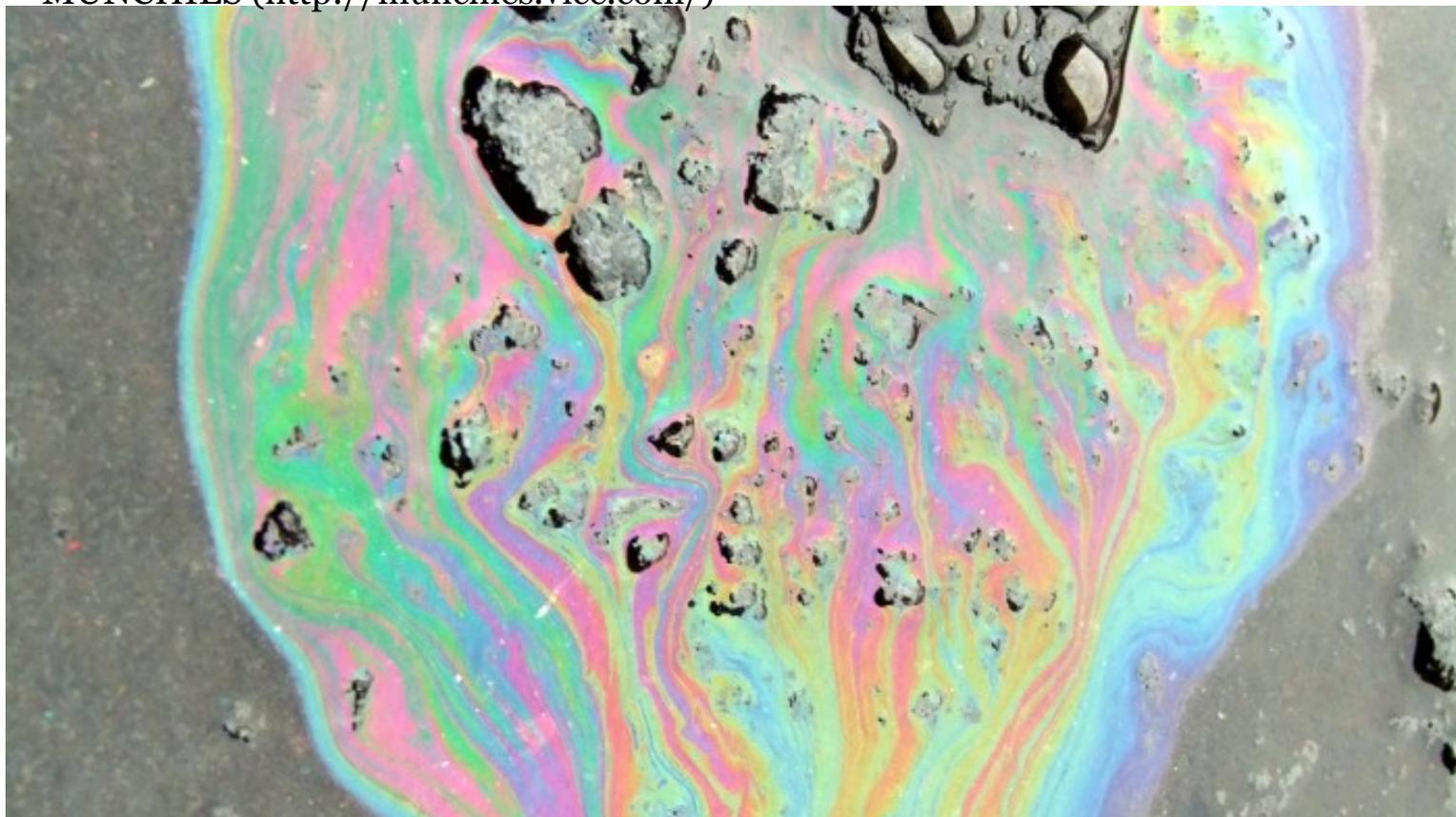


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# Southern California's Seafood Industry Is Choking on Oil

BY LAUREN ROTHMAN ([HTTP://MUNCHIES.VICE.COM/AUTHOR/LAUREN](http://munchies.vice.com/author/lauren))

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In the 1960s, the green movement was still a nascent one in the US: over the course of

the decade, the first laws to protect endangered species were established; environmental activist Stewart Brand published the seminal first edition of *The Whole Earth Catalog* (<http://www.wholeearth.com/index.php>); and Congress passed the earliest of a series of acts safeguarding the country's rivers and trailways. Then, early in the new year of 1969, an oil well ruptured off the coast of Santa Barbara, California, spewing millions of gallons of black gold into pristine coastal waters. It was the worst oil spill in US history, and it galvanized environmentalists, who began agitating for alternatives to the country's increasing reliance on fossil fuels.

So last Tuesday, when a Santa Barbara pipeline owned by Plains All American Pipeline burst and sent about 20,000 gallons of oil into the biologically dense Santa Barbara Channel, it was impossible not to compare the two events. As in 1969, miles of California coastline are now sticky with black oil; volunteers (<http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-volunteers-oil-spill-20150524-story.html>) are helping to scrub seabirds and shellfish clean; and local fishermen are venturing further out into the Pacific to meet their quotas after state officials announced a ban (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/23/us-california-oilspill-seafood-idUSKBN080DG20150523>) on fishing that encompasses more than 150 square miles of southern California waters.

“I think our first reaction is that we are never able to learn from our past mistakes,” says Maddalena Bearzi, president of the Ocean Conservation Society (<http://www.oceanconservation.org/>) based in nearby Marina Del Ray. “We continue to do the exact same things and we never learn.”

Though the fishing ban has the potential to disrupt the area's robust fishing economy, causing fishermen and uni divers (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/23/us-california-oilspill-seafood-idUSKBN0O8oDG20150523>) to seek their catches in more distant waters, Bearzi says she's in favor of it.

"I think it's a good decision," she says. "It's difficult to know for sure how this will affect fishermen, because we don't know how long the spill will affect sea life."

Ren Ostry, director of accounts at Community Seafood, a southern California-based community-supported fishery program (CSF), has firsthand experience with the effects of the fishing ban. Normally, the cooperative's 500 members receive a weekly share of local seafood, but beginning last Thursday and continuing through the coming weekend, the CSF has put all 500 shares on hold. The fishermen that supply Community Seafood will have to find new waters, and that means a change in product.

"We want to ensure that everything we source can be up to our standards," Ostry says. "We're hoping to pick back up over the weekend."

Fortunately for California fishermen, Ostry says, it's currently king salmon season in the north of the state, which will help tide the industry over until the state's cleanup efforts (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/california-oil-spill-estimate-revised-down->

1432662296) bear fruit.

“We’re hopeful that fishing in Santa Barbara can be restored after this cleanup,” she says.

Still, Ostry notes, the entire incident has been nothing short of a travesty.

“It’s really a tragedy, not just for wildlife but also for fishermen,” she says.

Ostry firmly believes that Plains All American, the oil company responsible for the spill, should be disciplined for its actions.

“This company absolutely has to be held accountable,” she says. “And the accountability issue is so much larger than what happens today or this week,” Ostry explains. She says that more than supplying its members with fresh fish, Community Seafood’s mission is to raise public awareness of the sustainability of wild-caught, as opposed to farmed, seafood.

“But incidents like this make our job so much harder,” she says. “Instead of being able to celebrate wild seafood, we’re stuck educating people about environmental tragedies. Instead of playing offense, we’re stuck playing defense,” she says.

Bearzi, of the Ocean Conservation Society, agrees that Plains All American should pay

for its mistakes.

“I think they should be fined for sure,” she says. “These guys have not been compliant to regulation in the past,” she says, referring to the company’s checkered past of environmental breaches (<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/5/20/plains-all-american-has-history-of-oil-spills.html>). Over the past two decades, the company has been responsible for oil spills in Los Angeles, Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Kansas. Since 1995, Al Jazeera America reports (<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/5/20/plains-all-american-has-history-of-oil-spills.html>), more than 10,000 incidents have resulted in 371 deaths, 1,398 injuries, and more than \$6 billion in reported property damage. At press time, Plains All American had not responded to requests for comment, but the Refugio Response Joint Information Center page reports (<http://www.refugioresponse.com/go/doc/7258/2517706/>) that nearly 1,000 gallons of oily water mixture have been recovered at the cleanup site.

Bearzi says that in spite of the cleanup efforts, the mood in southern California remains grim.

“We are all very upset that we have to have this type of issue before we really do anything about it.”

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