

Wildlife rescue center opens in Santa Cruz

By MICHAEL MERRILL
STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — The nation's newest, largest and most advanced marine wildlife veterinary care and research center opened today, next to the UC-Santa Cruz Long Marine Laboratory.

The center, created in response to a state mandate, will be the headquarters of the California Department of Fish and Game's Oil Spill Prevention Response (OSPR) program.

"Monterey Bay was chosen because it is the home range of the

California sea otter, a threatened sub-species," said UC-Santa Cruz Senior Public Information Officer Robert Irion.

The 18,000-square-foot, \$5 million facility at 1451 Shaffer Road will employ six full-time and two part-time Department of Fish and

Game staff members, who will be studying both the physical and toxicological effects of oil spills. Funding for the center came from a tax imposed upon oil companies and from lease sales of offshore drilling sites in southern California.

Although the center is owned

and operated by the DFG, it will work closely with UCSC, utilizing the expertise of several researchers including those already active at the DFG's Granite Canyon Station south of Carmel. Researchers there are currently conducting research

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on the toxicity of petroleum products, dispersants and cleaning agents used in oil spill response on various marine organisms.

Scheduled speakers at today's dedication ceremony included OSPR Administrator Pete Bontadelli, UCSC Chancellor M.R.C. Greenwood and California Department of General Services Deputy Director Eugene A. Spindler.

U.S. Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, while a member of the state Assembly, spearheaded the center's creation and the selection of Long Marine Lab as its site. "We never know when an oil spill is going to happen or how widespread the damage will be," Farr said. "The rescue center will ensure that animals will be treated quickly and professionally."

OSPR officials say the importance of the facility was illustrated after the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989 caused billions of dollars in damage to the Alaska fishing industry through the "toxicological effects of oil and the synergistic toxicants on marine animals."

"The chaotic nature of the animal rescue effort in Alaska following the

Exxon Valdez oil spill convinced many researchers that a permanent facility would improve the chances of saving wildlife," Irion said. "The new center focuses on sea otters, whose thick fur and near shore living patterns make them particularly vulnerable to oil's damaging effects."

The value of California's coastline is more than a draw for tourism and recreation. It is a primary link in the complex ecology of the open ocean as well. Any interruption of these processes can have disastrous results on systems thousands of miles from the actual oil spill.

One example of the disastrous effects of an oil spill can be illustrated by the much maligned sea otter. Adored by tourists and detested by fisherman, the otter is an integral part of the coastal ecology. Their primary food sources — abalone, starfish and sea urchins — are known as "grazers," which consume kelp.

When otters are removed from the system, these grazers over-feed on the kelp, which is also home to thousands of other organisms who depend on it for all or part of their life cycles. When the kelp dies, it takes a host of organisms with it.

The key to an otter's survival in the cold local waters, which are chilled by the Humboldt Current flowing south from Alaska, is its thick fur. Lacking the thick insulating layer of blubber that is found on most marine mammals, the otter's key to survival is its fur which contains as many as one million hairs per square inch. When not feeding, it spends hours grooming and cleaning its fur.

Petroleum causes these hairs to mat together. Once this happens, otters lose their insulation and simply die of hypothermia. The same holds true for marine birds. By interrupting the food chain at any level, the entire system collapses.

Irion said, in the event of an oil spill, the center can accommodate 125 sea otters, 100 marine birds, and a few seals and sea lions, cleaned and cared for by up to 100 veterinary staff, researchers and volunteers. The center will also host periodic training and response exercises for OSPR teams.

When the center is not being used for emergencies, UCSC researchers will work with OSPR scientists, conducting studies of the impact on California's coastal wildlife when petroleum is introduced to the environment.