

# Sea change for SS Palo Alto



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

A couple soaks up the sun at Seacliff State Beach on Tuesday as work gets under way aboard the SS Palo Alto cement ship to remove fuel oil.

## Workers begin to clean landmark shipwreck poisoning wildlife

By MATT FARLEY

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APTOS — Pollution experts are moving to stymie the source of fuel oil that has killed more than 50 birds near Seacliff Beach in recent years: the decrepit wreck of the SS Palo Alto.

"It's not exactly leaking," said Lt. John Sutton of the state Department of Fish and Game. "But oil is migrating from compartments below decks into the upper decks. (The concern is) that if a major storm comes through, it could spill out. So we're erring on the cautious side."

Since 2004, 70 oiled seabirds have been discovered near the wreck, according to Fish and Game's Office of Spill Prevention and Response. Most of them died. After two studies by salvage crews, officials traced the fuel back to the Palo Alto, a former military ship brought to Seacliff in the 1930s to house a nightclub and casino.

Members of Fish and Game, California State Parks and Recreation and Titan Maritime, the same company that towed the ship to its current location 75 years ago, began working this week to remove any remaining oil from the damaged tanker. Seacliff's fishing pier was closed to the public while workers in orange construction vests clambered along the Palo Alto's deck with a pressure washer Tuesday, hosing bird guano off the surface of the vessel.



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State Park rangers communicate with workers of the cement ship by radio Tuesday.

"The guano isn't something you want to be breathing," Sutton said. "Also, if you're working out there and get a cut, it can get infected in a hurry. They're also cutting off some rebar out there, because that's a bad thing to fall into."

In recent decades, the wreck, built mostly of cement and black iron in

1919, has deteriorated quickly, Sutton said. Now broken into four parts, the ship is home to thousands of fish, which attract flocks of cormorants, pelicans and gulls. One of the challenges of the \$1.8 million effort to clean up the Palo

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Alto is in doing it without disturbing the birds, Sutton said.

Another is in navigating the labyrinthine innards of the 435-foot ship. While Titan has schematics and drawings of Palo Alto's sister ship, the SS Peralta, compartments and decks may have shifted in odd ways as the vessel has broken up. Sutton said the team believes the oil is escaping from at least one of two submerged tanks, and has so far been contained to the wreck and the animals that feed in it. However, workers are unsure how

much oil remains inside.

"It could just be a couple of hundred gallons," Sutton said. "But the ship has a 40,000-gallon capacity. There isn't that much down there, but there could be a lot."

Eventually, Titan will anchor a 60-foot boat near the Palo Alto and use it as a platform for drivers and a hydraulic drill. Using a separate ship should allow workers to search the tanker for seepage without further damaging it, Sutton said. Any oil pumped out of the Palo Alto will be shipped to a plant in Washington, where it will be recycled, he said.

The project is scheduled to wrap up before the annual Monte Foundation fireworks show at the beach on Oct. 14.