

Animal shelter

Rescue center

Nature's oil-spill victims get a refuge

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SANTA CRUZ — Sea otters, birds and other wildlife injured in an oil spill have a place to go — Santa Cruz.

After five years of planning and construction, the Oiled Wildlife Veterinary Care and Research Center is about to open its doors.

It's a \$5.2 million center that everyone hopes will never have to be used for its primary purpose, said Pete Bontadelli, administrator of the state Office of Oil Spill Prevention & Response.

A dedication ceremony was held Monday

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morning with more than 100 dignitaries and officials receiving a preview of the new center, which will be shared by the state Department of Fish and Game and UC Santa Cruz. The center, which will be operational in the next month or two, is next to UCSC's Long Marine Lab on the city's western edge.

The National Marine Fisheries Service is also expecting to move a lab to the area, creating a major marine research community on the Westside.

There is nothing comparable to the Oiled Wildlife center in the nation, according to officials.

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Visitor at the dedication strolls through cages that will house sea otters in the event of an oil spill.

Rescue center

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During an oil spill, as many as 125 otters, 100 birds and about a half-dozen seals can be housed at the center.

A recent study estimated that there is better than a 20 percent chance of a major oil spill in California during the next 20 years, said Dave Jessup, senior wildlife veterinarian for the state Fish and Game Department. He will serve as director of the new center.

Small amounts of oil are spilled every month, he said.

The Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska demonstrated the vulnerability of sea otters to an oil spill. It is estimated that 3,000 or more otters were killed when 11 million gallons of oil spilled into Prince William Sound.

The Exxon Valdez accident was looked at when the Santa Cruz center was designed. People who helped treat animals

during the spill served as consultants in the early phases of the building's creation, making suggestions on water temperature and other details, according to Bontadelli.

Designed to look like an old barn typical of the Central Coast, the building is state-of-the-art on the inside, he said.

The center includes an animal nursery, a kitchen to prepare food for the wildlife, a surgery room, and separate clinics for birds and mammals. There is also 2,200 square feet of space for a necropsy lab and freezer storage.

Outside, there are five large saltwater pools for wildlife.

Two mobile units with trailers are also housed at the center and will hit the road to respond to spills up and down the coast.

The center's primary purpose is to aid oiled wildlife, but it will also be a headquarters for studying marine wildlife and the eco-

system. The university will be a research partner.

Jessup said one research project likely will try to answer why the threatened sea otter has decreased in numbers in the last few years.

In a survey earlier this year, 2,229 otters were seen on the coast, compared to 2,377 during a 1995 count.

Another study will look at the development of a patch to determine if an animal has been oiled, said Bontadelli.

During the Exxon Valdez rescue effort, some otters that were not oiled were still caught and as a result suffered from the handling, he said.

The patch would determine the presence of oil on the animals.

Funds for the center came from fees the oil industry pays to transport oil and from the interest collected from fees.