

Assessment of the SS Montebello

The SS Montebello is an oil tanker that was sunk six miles off the California Coast on December 23, 1941 by a Japanese submarine. The Montebello had loaded 73,571 barrels (3,089,982 gallons) of crude oil and 2477 barrels (104,034 gallons) of bunker fuel the day before at the Unocal Avila Beach Pier. It is believed that the entire cargo and fuel still remains on board. The vessel lies approximately 900 feet down in an upright position.

The Department of Fish and Game's Office of Spill Prevention and Response (OSPR) in partnership with Senator Sam Blakeslee's office, the U.S. Coast Guard, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, CalTrans and the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute are in the process of assessing the likelihood of a release from the Montebello and what the environmental and economic impacts would be from both a chronic and catastrophic release. This partnership has been named the SS Montebello Assessment Task Force.

The task force is proposing to conduct three studies, the completion of which will depend on obtaining sufficient funding, to assist it in completing the assessment. The first is a side scan sonar dive of the Montebello using an Autonomous Underwater Vehicle to determine the characteristics of the surrounding area around the Montebello. This dive has already taken place and the data gathered is being interpreted. The second study proposed would be a manned dive in an underwater submersible submarine with two individuals who have been down to the Montebello in 1996 and 2003. This study would be a visual comparison of the present state of the condition of the hull with what was seen in the previous dives. The final study would involve taking samples from each of the 18 cargo tanks to determine if there is in fact oil on board and what the consistence of the oil is.

The task force will prepare a report at the conclusion of these studies, if funding is available, that will detail the results of the studies and a recommendation for further actions.

Blakeslee introduced a bill in 2010 to require the OSPR Administrator to conduct an assessment of the Montebello, funded by the Oil Spill Response Trust Fund. The bill died without being heard in the Senate Natural Resources and Wildlife Committee.