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HUNTINGTON BEACH OIL SPILL

Spill Certain to Heat Up Debate on Offshore Oil Dr

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Ever since the Exxon Valdez disaster blackened Alaska's Prince William Sound last March, state and federal officials have warned that California's coastline could not be protected from an oil spill even one-tenth that size.

At the same time, the U.S. Department of Interior warned last year that there was a 94% chance of a major oil spill off the Southern California coast during the next 30 years.

Wednesday night's large spill from a tanker off Huntington Beach marked the second major incident off California since the disastrous 1969 blowout of an offshore platform off the Santa Barbara coast that spilled 77,000 barrels. In 1984, an estimated 24,000

barrels of oil spilled from the tanker Puerto Rican when it caught fire and blew up off San Francisco. None of these incidents approaches the 462,000-barrel Alaskan disaster.

But Wednesday's spill still is classified as a "major spill" by industry and state officials.

"That's a big deal. As we understand it, the slick is 1 1/4 miles long and 300 yards wide," said Robert C. Hight, chief of the State Lands Commission's legal division.

Whatever the Huntington Beach spill's final size, the political consequences may exceed its environmental impact.

It appears certain to spark new protests against offshore oil drilling at a time when President Bush is under pressure to ban all oil and gas exploration off the California coast.

The spill is also likely to add momentum to a sweeping environmental initiative proposed for the November ballot that would prohibit any new oil drilling in state waters unless there was a national emergency, and would impose a 25-cents-a-barrel tax to establish a \$500-million fund to prevent and clean up oil spills.

Even as industry crews attempted to contain the spill, two leading opponents of drilling off the California coast—Lt. Gov. Leo T. McCarthy and state Controller Gray Davis—were on their way to the scene, declaring that the spill proved the case for tough new fines on oil spillers and bans on new drilling.

McCarthy and Davis, both Democrats, are members of the State Lands Commission, which has banned any new drilling in state

waters. They have also pushed legislation to establish a \$500-million cleanup fund.

"I think this spill helps us get our legislation passed in Sacramento, which the oil industry is in the process of trying to weaken," McCarthy said minutes before he left for Huntington Beach.

"If we had that legislation in the statutes right now, British Petroleum would probably have to pay a \$25-million fine," McCarthy said.

Davis called the spill "a terrible tragedy with potentially tremendous environmental and economic consequences."

Since the Exxon Valdez accident, the oil industry has admitted that it had "neither the equipment nor the personnel" to handle such a catastrophic spill.

Last June, it pledged \$250 million to create five regional oil spill

centers capable of quickly responding to a Valdez-type disaster anywhere in U.S. coastal waters. One was planned for Long Beach.

But the industry and government regulators say most emphasis has to be placed on prevention, not cleanup.

Weather and sea conditions, they said, have more to do with whether a spill reaches the coast than human efforts to hold an oil slick at bay.

That is because oil spill cleanup technology—the use of floating booms to contain the oil, skimmers to pick it up and chemical dispersants to break it up before it reaches shore—prove ineffective in even moderate sea conditions.

For example, along large sections of the coast—especially in the north and in the Santa Maria basin north of Point Conception where

extensive drilling is contemplated—industry and government officials have said that conditions are often too rough for effective booming and skimming.

For that reason, even though California appears better prepared than many coastal states, cleanup containment technology may not do the job.

"There's a lot of luck involved. A lot of skill and a lot of preparation. But you can't fight Mother Nature," Skip Onstead, manager of an oil spill cooperative, told The Times last year.

While most of Southern California is covered by well-trained oil spill response teams, there are large sections of the California coast, including San Diego and the North Coast, that do not have crews that could reach even a minor spill.

Drilling

