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## Guidelines sought for seabird nesting sites

The deaths of hundreds of terns prompt officials and barge owners to seek safeguards.

By Louis Sahagun

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As authorities consider whether to file criminal charges in the deaths of hundreds of seabirds in the Los Angeles–Long Beach port complex, wildlife advocates and shippers on Thursday said they are considering new protocols for storing and moving barges that often become nesting sites.

"It's an issue that needs to be addressed," said Long Beach city prosecutor John Fentis. He is reviewing the actions of harbor crews connected with the deaths in June of more than 500 Caspian and elegant terns, many of them too young to fly.

In that case, San Diego–based Point Loma Maritime Services was attempting to move two barges to Santa Barbara for a fireworks display when the terns plummeted off the sides.

"The burden is on barge owners to understand that if they leave a barge at anchor for a long period of time, there is a possibility that birds are nesting there," Fentis said.

In an interview, Ralph Botticelli, owner of Point Loma Maritime Services, attributed the bird deaths to "an unfortunate accident" that occurred when his crew approached the barge and unintentionally scared the birds.

"It will never happen again," Botticelli said.

"If our guys had known there were birds out there, they wouldn't have used that barge," he said. "We learned our lessons. We will never approach

a barge without fully knowing what's on it. No matter what time of year, day or night. We will gingerly approach and check it out."

Another case involving more tern deaths occurred a week earlier on June 23. Connolly–Pacific Co. of San Pedro acknowledged that as many as two dozen terns — slim seabirds related to gulls — died after they were startled by a harbor crew.

Art Thompson, a public information officer for Connolly–Pacific's parent company, Knife River Corp., said an internal investigation determined that "there is no evidence the birds were killed intentionally."

"We believe it was an isolated, unfortunate incident, and it won't happen again," Thompson said.

However, interviews with Connolly–Pacific employees who asked that their names not be used for fear of losing their jobs blamed the incident on a supervisor who ordered them to "kick those birds off the ... barge." He said workers scooped up the birds and dumped them on the dock.

"I walked up to the dock and I could see all the little nests, dead birds and shells of hatchlings," one of the men recalled. "It's impossible to say that no one knew something wasn't wrong with that picture. We were disgusted."

Thompson said the supervisor in question neither denied nor confirmed giving an order to remove the birds.

In any case, "we're now looking for different spots to moor our barges when they are out of service," Thompson said. "Perhaps places that have more shipping traffic and therefore are less likely to become nesting grounds."

Even that may not satisfy environmentalists who are calling for reparations that could include designating some old barges as nesting sites.

"We know these guys didn't go out and intentionally kill birds," said Jay Holcomb, director of the International Bird Rescue Research Center in San Pedro, which collected hundreds of dead birds that washed ashore in Long

Beach in June. "But they were terribly insensitive.

"We'd like to see these companies settle out of court by agreeing to station some of their old funky barges in strategic points in the harbor," he said. "Let the birds use them as nesting sites, and then advertise them as tourist attractions."

In the meantime, California Department of Fish and Game Lt. Kent Smirl said his agency is planning to "incorporate barges into our harbor patrols."

Evidence of nesting birds, he said, would be reported to company officials and tug operators in charge of the floating platforms.

"We need to work together to find ways in which all interests can be accommodated," Thompson said. "We don't want this to happen again, and feel terrible it happened in the first place."

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