

Tern Deaths Turned Over to Prosecutor's Office

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Tern of Events - In Spring 2006, two full nests of elegant and Caspian terns were dumped into the ocean from a barge in Santa Barbara. Many of the terns were too young to fly and drowned in the water below.

Photo by: OSU-RTR/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service photo

The deaths of hundreds of terns that lived aboard a barge has sparked controversy over whether the deaths were accidental.

LONG BEACH - The case of 500 Caspian and elegant terns that died last summer when their nests were disturbed has been turned over to the Long Beach city prosecutor's office, and charges are pending.

"I am currently reviewing the case to see if there are any charges that should be filed," said John Fentis, Long Beach city prosecutor.

He said his office is looking at the actions of harbor crews connected with the deaths. He gave no further details.

The tragic story began when San Diego-based Point Loma Maritime Services was hired to move two empty barges with a tugboat to Santa Barbara as part of a fireworks display. The details are sketchy, but this commotion caused the seabirds, many too young to fly, to fall overboard to their deaths off the sides of the barges.

Ralph Botticelli, owner of Point Loma Maritime Services, said the whole thing was an accident and that if his crew knew the birds were living aboard the barges, they would never have moved them. He said authorities are "grasping for straws to get somebody to be responsible, when in fact, nobody did anything consciously wrong."

Animal rescuers said they think many of the birds must have been forced into the water because they were too young to fly.

The saga of the terns began in Spring 2006, when the little white birds, which are in the gull family, began nesting on two empty barges moored in Long Beach Harbor. The birds, which are protected under federal law, soon multiplied and hundreds of them, adults, babies and eggs in nests, covered the barges, becoming somewhat of a tourist attraction for passing ships.

The International Bird Rescue Research Center (IBRRC) said the birds were the northernmost breeding colony in the world and the first recorded colony established on barges.

Immediately after the deadly incident, the San Pedro office of the IBRRC received numerous 911 calls about baby birds washing ashore. This led to a seven-month investigation, headed by the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG), along with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"It was a very lengthy and thorough investigation," said DFG spokesman Steve Martarano. "We tried to determine what happened to the birds and how they ended up in the water."

Many environmentalists said state and federal wildlife officials should have realized that the barges had become tern nesting sites worthy of protection. They had also grown frustrated with the length of the inquiry. Fentis was recently quoted as saying that barge owners should be responsible for knowing if one of their unused barges is being used by nesting birds.

Of the estimated 500 birds that were involved in the incident, 24 were rescued. In August, the IBRRC released nine of them at Cabrillo Beach and the other 15 at the Salton Sea. Both locations were already populated with feeding terns.

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