

Editorial: Santa Barbara spill underscores need to go green

By The Bee Editorial Board

It's hard to overstate the beauty of Refugio State Beach in Santa Barbara County. To stand at its edge — the dolphins leaping, the pelicans soaring, the Pacific Ocean blue and limitless before you — is to glimpse California before the advent of man.

So to see it now despoiled by the May 19 oil spill is heartbreaking. In a state that is still far too reliant on fossil fuels and the gas guzzlers that consume them, the implications are obvious: less oil dependence. Unfortunately, at least in the near term, weaning ourselves is a balancing act.

This accident arose from a ruptured inland pipeline that is believed to have sent as many as 105,000 gallons of heavy crude coursing down onto the beach, to be washed into the ocean. The cause is under investigation, the cleanup cost will be huge, and damage will linger for years.

We know this because these spills are by now familiar. Though the industry has brought much wealth, and though the state has long since banned new offshore drilling leases, every few years, from Seal Beach to San Francisco, there's some oil-related trauma.

Indeed, the modern environmental movement — including Earth Day — grew out of a 1969 California oil spill that remains the third largest in U.S. waters, behind the Exxon Valdez and Deepwater Horizon. It happened off the coast of, yes, Santa Barbara.

This disaster has resurrected the usual calls for running Big Oil entirely out of California. But what would replace it while we struggle to coax millions into mass transit and electric cars?

The Middle East, so we can prop up governments that hate us? Some miserable nation with no environmental regulation? How many spills occur in such places, and how often do we hear of them?

As crews haul muck from the sand and tend oil-soaked seabirds, as fishermen are idled and beaches closed, it's natural to want to thank oil for its service and send it packing. But off-shoring our pollution is just robbing Peter environmentally to pay Paul.

That's why we must hasten the transition to renewable energy sources, and act on Gov. Jerry Brown's call for a 50% cut in our petroleum use. Maybe we can all find a less oil-centric way to get to the coast or the mountains by next year. We only have so many Refugio State Beaches to lose.