

Today is Monday, May 15, 2006

Originally published Wednesday, May 10, 2006

Updated Wednesday, May 10, 2006

5 fish companies charged with illegal dumping

Squid parts allegedly contaminated the water and killed sea life around Terminal Island.

By Dan Laidman

Copley News Service

The Los Angeles City Attorney's Office filed charges against five Harbor Area seafood businesses Tuesday, alleging that they dumped squid parts into Terminal Island's Fish Harbor, contaminating seawater and killing marine life.

"Because of the extent of the damage and the ongoing environmental impact, we felt it was important to file these charges to send a message that we're looking out for environmental safety at the port," said Frank Mateljan, a spokesman for City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo.

Charged were Western Fish Co., Seven Oceans Fisheries Corp., Del Mar Seafoods Inc., Tri-Marine International and Southern California Seafood Inc.

Calls to all five firms seeking comment were not returned.

The accusations date to last year's thriving squid season in which fishing boats from up and down the California coast used the harbor's offloading and processing operations.

State law prohibits the discharge of squid wastewater within 3 miles of shore, but investigators witnessed boats dumping such waste directly into the harbor, according to the City Attorney's Office.

Squid parts were discovered in dock areas, and foam and black squid ink were seen on top of the water. Scientists at the Southern California Marine Institute, a research consortium of several universities, linked the discharges to lowered oxygen levels in nearby water and the death of fish and other sea life.

The Fish Harbor-based institute lost many of its own fish, which it keeps for research purposes in large tanks fed by harbor water.

"The oxygen was too low to support life in our tanks," said Lisa Gilbane, project coordinator for the marine institute. "Some of those fish we had for eight years."

While more fish have since returned to the harbor, Gilbane said that it may take some invertebrates years to re-establish themselves in the area.

The institute notified authorities, including the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board, which investigated late last year and issued notices to several companies to stop the discharges.

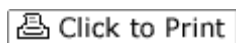
The Los Angeles Port Police joined the probe and the case was forwarded to the city attorney's

Environmental Justice and Protection Unit.

Prosecutors charged each company with violations of the state water code, state Penal Code, Los Angeles Port Tariff and state fish and game regulations. The violations carry maximum fines that range from \$1,000 to \$50,000.

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