

Victims of 1990 O.C. Oil Spill to Split \$4 Million

Proposed settlement
would end 12 years of
litigation over the
American Trader
disaster off Huntington
Beach, Newport Beach.

By DAN WEIKEL
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More than 200 fishermen, oceanfront businesses and property owners will share \$4 million to settle the last remaining lawsuit from a disastrous 1990 tanker accident that fouled the Orange County coast with nearly half a million gallons of Alaskan crude oil.

The agreement, if approved next month by a federal judge, will close the books on one of the state's worst oil spills and end a 12-year-old court battle that turned into a bitter paper war with attorneys for the ship owner.

"This is good news. I was wondering if they were going to wait until all of us were dead," said Dale Sleight, 54, a former lobsterman from Garden Grove who claims his fishing business was ruined by the spill. "If this comes through, it will be a wind-fall. I thought nothing would ever come of this."

Under terms of the settlement, a \$4-million fund would be set up for about 250 businesses and individuals who claimed they suffered financial losses from the February 1990 disaster that occurred when the American Trader hit its own anchor while mooring at an offshore terminal near Huntington Beach.

The spill affected 15 miles of Orange County coastline, closing beaches, harbors and waters just off shore for weeks.

Among those seeking damages are members of the historic Newport Beach dory fleet, fish canneries in San Pedro, and the 296-room Hilton in Huntington Beach, which had been preparing its grand opening when the crude washed ashore. The group of business owners originally sought \$14 million in damages.

The case has dragged on so long that some of the original plaintiffs have died.

In addition to the settlement fund, court records state that the defendants will pay the plaintiffs' legal fees and court costs, to be determined at a later date. Also in those papers, they denied any wrongdoing.

Named as defendants are BP America Inc.; Golden West Refining Co., the terminal operator; Attransco Inc., the tanker owner; and Brandenburger Marine Inc., the employer of the American Trader's harbor pilot. The class-action lawsuit was filed in U.S. District Court seven days after the spill.

Both sides finally came to a settlement agreement after several months of discussions and filed the proposed terms in court Dec. 20. Judge Robert J. Kelleher will rule on the proposal Jan. 13.

"It's about time," said Shawn Millbern, a senior vice president with Robert Mayer Corp., which owns the Waterfront Hilton Beach Resort, which originally sought \$2.7 million in damages. "This is certainly good Christmas news."

The spill had a wide and immediate effect. The bountiful Huntington Flats fishing grounds were temporarily shut down. Harbor entrances were sealed off, preventing tour boats, Catalina-bound ferries and fishing boats from going to sea. Visitors, conventioners and tourists canceled hotel reservations or cut short their stays. Owners of beachfront vacation rentals said they had a difficult time attracting renters for months.

"Amazing," said Douglas Edlund, 61, a Corona del Mar real estate investor who has asked for \$6,500 in lost income from an oceanfront duplex on 66th Street in Newport Beach. "With all the costs of going to court, I am glad to see there is something left for people making claims."

John Reilly, an attorney for the tanker owner, declined to discuss the case. Gretchen Nelson, one of several attorneys for the plaintiffs, could not be reached for comment.