Beavers Help Contain Fuel Spill, Recover Slowly

ANNIE KNOX, Associated Press

This photo provided by the Wildlife Rehabilitation Center of Northern Utah shows a beaver being washed after being saturated with diesel fuel from the Willard Bay State Park spill at the Wildlife Rehabilitation Center of Northern Utah in Ogden, Utah, Tuesday, March 26, 2013. The animals are showing signs of recovery, but have not been given a clean bill of health yet. (AP Photo/Wildlife Rehabilitation Center of Northern Utah)

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Talk about unlikely heroes.

A group of at least six beavers at a Utah bird refuge have emerged as key players in helping contain a fuel leak that left half of them with severe burns. The Chevron fuel spill leaked about 27,000 gallons of crude oil into soil and marshes at Willard Bay State Park last week after a split in a Salt Lake City-to- Spokane, Wash. pipeline.

The beavers' dam blocked a hefty portion of diesel from rolling onto the bay, though it's uncertain exactly how much, officials said. Three of the beavers were rescued earlier this week, and three more that were rescued Tuesday night are being cared for under a Wildlife Rehabilitation Center of Northern Utah program.

"That dam absolutely saved the bay," said Dalyn Erickson, a wildlife specialist running the program. The dam held fuel in place and kept it from going any further, she said.

The beavers that were part of the group rescued Tuesday night had burns on their skin and eyes, and only patches of fur left on their bodies. Erickson said she worries that some of the newly rescued beavers might not survive the fallout from the spill. It's unknown whether any other beavers might remain near the fuel leak site and

have yet to be rescued, officials said.

One of the new beavers, a head-strong mother, is resisting the three-a-day cleanings with Dawn dish soap. So Erickson and other workers had to sedate her. Workers brought in more than 40 large bottles of the soap to scrub the beavers clean during their hour-long baths.

The three animals rescued earlier in the week arrived at the center slicked with fuel but burn-free. They now show signs of recovery, Erickson said. For example, they're rubbing their bellies in an effort to groom themselves. One of them can't stop eating, Erickson says, a sign that he's getting stronger. Another is breathing gustily because the diesel burnt his nostrils. The last one is still exhausted, dozing off during bath time.

Protecting other animals and plants is part of the beavers' daily routine, said Phil Douglass, spokesman for the Department of Wildlife Resources. Beavers are natural homemakers, he said, crediting beaver dams, or "lodges," for drawing moose to Utah because moose like still waters for drinking. The dams also keep the water cool for trout and make surrounding areas healthier by inviting more plant growth.

The leak is Chevron's third in Utah in the last three years. In June 2010, a spill involved more than 30,000 gallons of crude oil near Red Butte Gardens in Salt Lake City. And in December 2010, a leak near the same site involved about 21,000 gallons.

John Whitehead of the Division of Water Quality said trace amounts of fuel seeped into the ground, then bled into the bay, but did not flow overtop the water. The state is studying water samples to see how the spill could affect people, animals and birds around the refuge.

Investigators are still working to determine the exact cause of the spill.

The Federal office dealing with pipelines has barred Chevron from reopening the pipeline until it gets government approval.

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