

Arson, diesel spill affects Auke Bay, says Dr. Rice

by Thane Kelly
WHALESONG REPORTER

In the wee hours of the morning, some people saw a 60-foot fireball in Auke Bay. A 60-foot fireball is a little hard to conceptualize, but to give an example, the amount of heat generated was enough to cause rocks on the beach to spontaneously explode. That was Tuesday, Sept. 21. According to the Juneau Empire, a passerby smelled the diesel and reported it to the police and fire departments that arrived at 4:20 a.m.

At 4:21 a.m. a call was placed to the Capital City Fire and Rescue that the DeHart's ramp was burning, and an electrical transformer was badly scorched. The transformer was filled with pressurized cooling oil, which is explosive. AEL&P shut down Auke Bay's power while the fire was being put out, to minimize the likelihood of an accident. The fire was actually coming

from a patch of lit diesel in the water, approximately 25-square-feet in area.

What should have been a 90-gallon spill turned into a 1600 gallon spill... The fire did an estimated \$12,000 worth of damage, with an additional \$50,000 worth of cleanup costs.

Rickey Gottardi is accused of cutting the fuel lines and lit the fuel with a blowtorch. As if this wasn't bad enough, what should have been a 90-gallon spill turned into a 1600-gallon spill due to a deteriorated rubber gasket which was not meant for petroleum use. The spilt

fuel was primarily diesel with about 35 gallons of gasoline. The suspect was arrested easily, since there was a videotape from a surveillance camera. Also found were the propane torch and knife used to cut the lines. The fire did an estimated \$12,000 worth of damage, with an additional \$50,000 worth of cleanup costs.

Interview with Dr. Jeep Rice

Dr. Jeep Rice, the Program Manager and researcher for the National Marine Fisheries Service at the Auke Bay Laboratory, had some comments.

Q: Has the spill cleanup been completed?

A: Yes and no. The human clean up activities have probably been completed for sure, but nature will continue the natural recovery process of dilution and dissipation through the winter. Winter storm waves will work the surface sediments, and clean water will allow the organisms contaminated with the spill to slowly depurate any significant loads of hydrocarbons from the spill.

Q: Is any research being done at the Auke Bay lab regarding the effects of the spill?

A: We have gathered mussel and sediment samples that may be analyzed to determine if there have been chemical recovery of the spill. We actually have samples taken prior to the spill this summer, samples taken the day following the spill, and now we have some samples taken a week or more after the spill, and probably will do some limited sampling this winter.

Q: Any additional comments or concerns?

A: Yes, we have concerns about the spill. It was not a large spill, when comparing to the Exxon Valdez spill of 1989 for example, but it is another damaging input to add to the many small spills that are common in a harbor that is used extensively by boaters. In a harbor situation, it is the continuing damage from a succession of many spills, mostly small, like a gallon or two that can come out of a bilge, or when a boater has a leaky fuel tank, or is sloppy in the filing, or just in the consumption of fuel by lots of "2 stroke" engines, where as much as 30 percent of the fuel is discharged in the exhaust without burning. The damage to the fauna inside the marina may have been significant, but the choice was already made a long time ago to make that a marina.

More disturbing to me are the aerial photos of the spill that I have seen that shows the drift of the slick out past Wadleigh and Auke Nu creeks and into the Auke Nu cove where there is a struggling eel grass bed. These are productive habitats for salmon spawn and rearing, and also for herring. I would hate to see these areas absorb any more impact than they have. If Auke Bay is to survive as a productive refuge habitat for herring and other wildlife, it needs to retain the clean coves and shoreline outside of the inner marina area, and the chronic pollution originating from inside the marina areas needs to be minimized and contained as much as possible. 🐋

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