



Caring for Our Coast

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February 10, 2025

TO: Supervisor Kathryn Barger, Chair
Supervisor Hilda L. Solis
Supervisor Holly J. Mitchell
Supervisor Lindsey P. Horvath
Supervisor Janice Hahn,

FROM: Gary Jones, Director

SUBJECT: **IMMEDIATE ACTION TO REMOVE POTENTIALLY TOXIC FIRE DEBRIS AND CONTAMINANT RUNOFF FROM COUNTY BEACHES – 5-DAY REPORT (ITEM 51-C, AGENDA OF FEBRUARY 4, 2025)**

On February 4, 2025, your Board instructed the Department of Beaches and Harbors (DBH) as operator and manager of the County's coastline, in consultation with Department of Public Works (DPW), and Office of Emergency Management, to report back to the Board in 5 days on whether protocols identified in the December 11, 2023 Board report were followed and what additional protocols and resources are needed to respond before and after a rainstorm event to remove any fire debris and ash from beaches and water, including recommendations for an on-call contractor to help facilitate rapid removal.

Implementation of Protocols and Resource Requirements

In the aftermath of the Palisades Fire and the January 26, 2025 rainstorm that followed, DBH has followed the protocols identified in the December 11, 2023 Board report. Specifically, DBH performed pre-storm preparation on beaches involving the use of heavy equipment (loader, excavator) to remove wind-blown sand from the beach storm drain openings and ensure that drains would be clear and free-flowing. At several beach locations, storm drains are situated three to four feet underground, necessitating the use of heavy equipment to excavate and eliminate the sand obstructing the drain openings, thereby facilitating a direct route to the ocean. Additionally, DBH crews contour the



surrounding beach area (if needed) to promote the natural flow of stormwater into the sea. To prevent trash receptacles from being swept away by storm surges or buried in the sand due to high winds, they are relocated further inland.

In its consultation with DBH, DPW described that prior to the Palisades Fire, routine protocols consistent with the December 11, 2023 Board report were followed in County-maintained areas to prevent trash and pollution from entering the Santa Monica Bay. However, the Palisades Fire caused temporary disruptions to some of the routine protocols. For example, DPW was temporarily unable to provide street sweeping services to some County maintained areas, maintenance of some drainage infrastructure was curtailed, and some Low Flow Diversions were temporarily disabled due to loss of electrical service.

Post-storm cleanup by DBH typically involves a combination of heavy machinery and manual efforts dependent on the equipment and staff available, and the prevailing beach weather conditions. Staffing is adjusted to address the cleaning of beaches, prioritizing the beach areas most frequented by the public. DBH Grounds Maintenance Workers focus on the manual collection of loose debris like driftwood pieces and smaller litter along the tideline. For larger items such as tree branches, logs, and sea kelp, heavy equipment is used for removal. Heavy equipment is not used on wet sand to avoid disturbance to coastal wildlife and contamination of marine habitats and is not used during rainstorms to maintain crew safety in the event of lightning.

Since the Palisades Fire erupted, DBH beach maintenance crews have been removing larger fire debris, such as timber and metal, that washed up on beaches daily. Such cleanup prevents excess debris from accumulating on the beaches. In response to the initial rain event and in preparation for additional rainstorms, DBH submitted requests through Cal OES for assistance with testing for toxins the finer, dark material that appeared on beaches impacted by outfalls. Those requests also sought potential remediation assistance by partner agencies with expertise in working in sensitive habitat and access to proper equipment to remove the fine silty material that washed up at Will Rogers and Topanga beaches, should it be deemed necessary.

DBH lacks the equipment and in-house expertise to test or remove such fine silty material from the beach. DPW, DBH, and the Department of Public Health (DPH) have been meeting regularly with the California Office of Emergency Services, L.A. Regional Water Quality Control Board, and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (Office of Spill Prevention and Response) to review sediment testing plans and results and evaluate the status of ocean water quality and quality of sediment on County beaches. Resources agencies assessing the situation have discussed the importance of testing silty runoff materials prior to removal to inform any remediation efforts, and expressed concerns about sediment removal that could unnecessarily harm marine habitat and the environment.

Test results obtained by the County to date indicate that the fine silty materials sampled from the impacted areas are not hazardous nor toxic and accordingly, may remain on the beaches and do not require specialized removal or other treatment. Note that sampling of beach debris and ocean water by relevant agencies will continue following any additional rains. In the future, should sediment removal or other specialized treatment be deemed necessary based on test results, additional resources would be needed by DBH to accomplish that task while balancing other environmental concerns.

Finally, there is some risk that DBH's operations, including typical cleanup protocols, could be impacted in future storm events by extensive demand for use of beach parking lots operated by DBH. DBH is currently trying to balance and address numerous requests for parking lot space from public and private entities involved in the residential and environmental cleanup in the aftermath of the Palisades Fire. So far, however, such operational impacts have been minimal.

Recommended additional resources and protocols:

Although DBH followed the protocols outlined in DPW's December 11, 2023 report, those protocols were intended for regular storms and not fire-related incidents such as the January 26, 2025 storm that followed the Palisades Fire. Accordingly, we recommend adding a protocol, applicable in post-fire storm scenarios, requiring DBH to immediately notify DPH and DPW upon observing any fire-related debris on the beaches or in the ocean water, so that samples can be promptly taken and tested by the appropriate agencies. Additionally, we recommend that one agency be designated to collect and post all test results to a central location so that all involved agencies (and the public) have access to the test results and can coordinate appropriate remediation, if any, without unnecessary delay. Additional information regarding sampling and testing protocols, inter-agency collaboration, and potential funding sources will be set forth in the reports back by DPW in response to Items 1 and 4 and DPH in response to Item 3 in the Board's February 4, 2025 action.

GJ:AC

c: Beach Board Deputies
Executive Office of the Board of Supervisors
Chief Executive Officer
Department of Public Works
Office of Emergency Management