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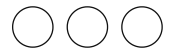
Hair and mushrooms create a recipe for cleaning up oily beaches

SAN FRANCISCO BAY OIL SPILL Their mats absorb the slick stuff, then oyster mushrooms turn it to compost



Meredith May, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Chronicle / Michael Macor

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spill14_hair_106_mac.jpg David Hirtz, a volunteer with a Neighborhood Emergency Response Team, searches Ocean Beach with his hair mat for any globs of oil washing up onshore. Lisa Gautier operates a nonprofit called matteroftrust.org that reuses products. She is providing mats of human hair, hair collected from hairdressers across the , that are being used to absorb oil along the beaches in San Francisco Bay, from last weeks oil spill. Michael Macor / The Chronicle Photo taken on 11/13/07, in San Francisco, CA, USA MANDATORY CREDIT FOR PHOTOG AND SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE/NO SALES-MAGS OUT

Michael Macor

A group of guerrilla volunteers is cleaning oil from San Francisco's beaches using an unorthodox, albeit totally organic, method: human hair and mushrooms.

Using mats made of hair, they are absorbing the droplets of oil that have washed ashore since a cargo ship rammed the base of a Bay Bridge tower last week, spilling 58,000 gallons of fuel.

Hair, which naturally absorbs oil from air and water, acts as a perfect sponge, said [Lisa Gautier](#) of San Francisco, who provided 1,000 hair mats. They are about the size of a doormat, tightly woven with dark hair, and feel somewhat like an S.O.S pad.

While the mats may not be the obvious choice among hazardous waste experts, they hit San Francisco's green chord: More than 700 volunteers have tried them in recent days. Organizers hope their success will inspire

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Gautier had 1,000 of them on hand because she runs a nonprofit, Matter of Trust, which matches donations from businesses with needy nonprofits. She collects human hair from Bay Area salons and sends it to Georgia to be woven into mats, which she then gives to the San Francisco Department of the Environment to absorb used motor oil.

Once the mats are soaked with black gunk, oyster mushrooms will take over, growing on the mats and absorbing the oil.

National mushroom expert [Paul Stamets](#) was in town the weekend after the spill for the Green Festival, heard of Gautier's work and donated \$10,000 worth of oyster mushrooms to harvest on the oily hair mats.

Gautier said the mushrooms will absorb the oil within 12 weeks, Gautier said, turning the hair mats into nontoxic compost.

"You make it like a lasagna," Gautier said. "You layer the oily hair mats with mushrooms and straw, turn it in six weeks, and by 12 weeks you have good soil."

The soil may not be good enough to grow carrots but is certainly good enough to use for landscaping along roads, she said.

The Environmental Protection Agency caught wind of the hair brigade and is giving the volunteers four-hour classes to certify them to clean up oil, Gautier said.

Cole Hardware provided discount white Tyvex protection suits, and city workers from the Department of the Environment pitched in the 800 hair mats they had on hand.

On Tuesday, volunteers used the mats and white plastic forks to gingerly lift tiny oil blobs from the sand at Ocean Beach.

"It's interesting how when we are challenged, we become more inventive," said volunteer [David Hirtz](#), who lives nearby and is a member of the Neighborhood Emergency Response Team run through the [San Francisco Fire Department](#).

"Instead of yelling and complaining and blaming, you are doing something about it," he said.

By Tuesday afternoon, piles of garbage bags full of the used hair mats were sitting on Ocean Beach. Gautier says they will be placed in bins until she can locate a place to make one huge pile and sprinkle in the mushrooms. She's tried to contact people from the O'Brien's Group, hired by the ship owner to do cleanup with skimmers, to ask them to take the pile, but so far hasn't gotten a response.

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The Coast Guard, which in the first days after the spill turned hundreds of volunteers away from the beaches due to safety concerns, was not delighted when informed of the latest eco-volunteer effort.

"I live in San Francisco, too, and I understand wanting to clean the beach in a way that's good for the environment, but this stuff is toxic, and people who are not trained shouldn't touch it," said Coast Guard Petty Officer Mariana O'Leary.

Gautier said nearly all the people using hair mats have since been trained. Even so, she ran out of hair mats Tuesday.

She's been talking with a company in China that makes industrial-sized hair mats about getting more shipped to San Francisco. Gautier said she can even have large sea booms made by stuffing hair into nylon stockings.

"This can completely revolutionize oil spill cleanup," she said, reaching down with a mat to soak up a glob on Ocean Beach.

Two barefoot joggers passed by.

"That's amazing," Gautier said. "Haven't they heard it's dangerous out here?"

Online resources

To donate hair:

www.matteroftrust.org/programs/hairmatsinfo.html

YouTube video of volunteers using hair mats:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=WscZJ2Dh0RY

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Reach Meredith on

Meredith May is a feature writer at The San Francisco Chronicle, where she started in 1999. Her 2004 narrative series on a war-wounded Iraqi boy won the PEN USA Literary Award for Journalism and the Pulitzer Prize for photography. She has covered the Olympic Games, investigated sex trafficking between Korea and San Francisco's massage parlors, and in Nepal. A third-generation beekeeper, Meredith cares for two beehives on the roof of The Chronicle and documents her adventures in apiculture, from harvesting honey to making mead and candles, in the Honeybee Chronicles column in the Home & Garden section.

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