

A Newsletter
About Prevention,
Preparedness,
and Response

Spill SCENE



Oil spill prevention works, but needs to be broader

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Spill Prevention, Preparedness, and Response Program Manager

Most oil spills are preventable. The risks are calculable.

Often, if you interrupt the sequence of events leading to a spill, it can be avoided. But prevention takes constant, committed attention, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

There have been at least 47 oil spills of 10,000 gallons or more in Washington since 1964. The largest spill came from the troop ship *General M.C. Meiggs* near Cape Flattery on Jan. 1, 1972, spilling 2.3 million gallons of oil.

More than 7,000 times each year, large commercial ships enter Washington waters bound for ports in Puget Sound, British Columbia, Grays Harbor and the Columbia River. These vessels include oil tankers, various types of cargo ships, large commercial fish processing ships, and cruise ships. Another 4,500 tank-barge transits and 160,000 ferry transits occur in these same waters each year. Additionally, a large number of military vessels "call" on our ports.

Individually, these vessels may carry up to 33 million gallons of crude oil or refined petroleum products, either as fuel or cargo. Collectively, they carry about 15.1 billion gallons across Puget Sound waters, and the numbers are expected to increase as our population and Pacific Rim commerce continues to grow.

While it's been decades since we had a million-gallon spill, the risk of such a catastrophe continues to loom over us every day. Thanks to the diligent efforts of industry, the Coast Guard and Ecology, we have greatly reduced the number of spills.

We need to continue that vigilance to make sure complacency does not set in.

Ecology and the U.S. Coast Guard have vessel-inspection programs that help ensure the safety of our vital commerce. Our inspectors focus on first-time callers to Washington ports as well as

every vessel that could be considered high risk for a spill.

A history of violations and other factors can affect the vessel's risk status and determine whether Ecology's staff of professional mariners will board it.

First-time callers usually get an informational visit, introducing them to Washington state requirements and regulatory responsibilities. For high-risk vessels, we look for organizational, personnel and equipment problems that could lead to an accident or spill.

The inspections are effective. Our data show that, for up to a full year, ships that have had their refueling process observed by an Ecology inspector have significantly fewer refueling spills than other vessels operating in Washington waters.

Sometimes, ship inspections yield unexpected and unwelcome results. Inspections of several ships entering the Columbia River and Puget Sound have uncovered cases in which crew members have bypassed required pollution-prevention equipment and routinely discharged waste oil directly into the ocean.

Our discovery led to a nation-



wide investigation of ship operators that has resulted in several successful criminal prosecutions, prison time, and millions of dollars in fines.

Washington's spill-prevention program is recognized as one of the best in the country, and yet we still have gaps. Last winter's spill at Point Wells illustrated one of those gaps when oil spilled into Puget Sound from a barge that was overfilled while oil cargo was being transferred.

As a result of that spill, the 2004 Legislature acted quickly to authorize Ecology to develop regulations, after a thorough study of oil transfers. That study will examine under what circumstances oil booms should be deployed before petroleum products are transferred over water, and what other safeguards should be considered as well. As part of this effort, we will evaluate mobile fueling operations from tank trucks and smaller land-based facilities that have not been required to have oil-spill contingency plans and spill prevention procedures in the past.

We have begun the studies that will eventually determine what additional measures should be taken to further protect our waters from spills. We expect to take some of those steps under this new authority, while others may require additional action by the state Legislature.

Ecology works hard in partnership with all of our "customers" to make sure Pacific Rim trade continues to provide needed jobs and material goods, while protecting the environment. Already, the marine shipping industry, petroleum trucking companies, ports, and

other interested parties have offered their expertise to help us proceed with this process. We also invite all who care about Puget Sound and our other marine waters to stay informed and let us know what you think.

The Department of Ecology's Spills Program web site is: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/spills/spills.html>

Response workboat pulling boom.



The Dalco Passage oil spill mystery

"This spill was a wake-up call for our spills program. We want to make sure we learn from mistakes and ensure that our citizens can have confidence that we have the best system possible for responding to spills," said Dale Jensen, spills program manager.

In the middle of the night on October 14, the first call came in to the U.S. Coast Guard's Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) and was then transferred to the National Response Center (NRC). Washington's Emergency Management received a fax from NRC and notified an Ecology after-hours responder. A tugboat master reported oil sheen in the area south of Vashon Island in the central Puget Sound area. VTS said they would report any further calls of oil on water and record all vessels that transited the area. Shortly after 7:00 a.m., residents of Vashon and Maury islands were the next to alert Ecology to the dismal tale of black oil covering their beaches.

Orphan spills present unique challenges - specifically no identifiable product, amount or location - and in this case, darkness and fog interfered with early morning assessment of the spill, making it impossible to fly over the spill and see how large it was. Ecology and the Coast Guard acknowledge that in spite of their on-going Drilltrac training they have more work to do in the area of orphan spills.

For this spill, responders from the U.S. Coast Guard, Washington's departments of Ecology, and Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Navy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and numerous response contractors jumped into a response that occupied their time and consumed their energy for the next 10 days.

More than 280 emergency response personnel arrived on-scene and in the command post to direct the cleanup and recovery of the spilled oil. Ultimately, 6,842 gallons of oily water and 35 tons of oily debris were picked up.

(The Dalco Passage
oil spill mystery - continued)

Approximately 21 miles of shoreline was oiled. At the peak of the response, more than 18,000 feet of boom had been deployed as well as 14 response vessels, 21 workboats and 10 skimmers.

Wildlife rescue workers arrived and waited for the inevitable to happen. Fortunately, due to the timing of the spill, few birds had migrated to the area and only one Western Grebe covered in oil was found and captured, treated and released. One seal pup that had oil on part of its fur was taken for treatment but later died. It was transferred to a NOAA Fisheries lab for evaluation.

An investigation began immediately. Oil samples were taken from vessels that had been in the area prior to the spill being reported and the samples were sent to Manchester Lab. Tests were run and the process of elimination began.

As in any investigation, fingerprinting (the oil) and interviewing potential witnesses helps narrow the list of suspects. As lab results come in, subpoenas are issued and a few vessels are more closely scrutinized. The Coast Guard and Ecology investigators remain silent while they gather the information they need to pinpoint the culprit.

“Its detective work,” said Larry Altose, a spokesman for Ecology. “It’s just on a slightly different beat. Instead of the gritty streets of the city, it’s a maritime investigation of ships and around ports.”

Lt. Cmdr. Michael Dreier, a spokesman for the Coast Guard, is reported to have said, “They’re kidding themselves if in the middle



Responders on beach clean up with pompoms.

of Puget Sound they think they can get away with this.”

Cleanup efforts have been completed and the cost reached almost \$2 million.

Following the spill and criticism of the delayed response, Gov. Gary Locke and Coast Guard Rear Adm. Jeffrey Garrett named representatives from impacted local communities, environmental groups, port and shipping associations, cleanup companies and government agencies to the “Oil Spill Early Action Task Force”. The group will make recommendations for better ways to respond to oils spills at night and in bad weather. Their first meeting was held on Nov. 19. For more information about the task force, visit Ecology’s web site at <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/spills/response/taskforce/tasksforce.htm>

The task force is focusing on the early stages of spill response, including how to best alert govern-

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ment officials, tribes and other concerned groups, and to develop a volunteer program of “coast watchers”, and how to take full advantage of available technology, such as infrared-equipped helicopters that can scope out spills at night.

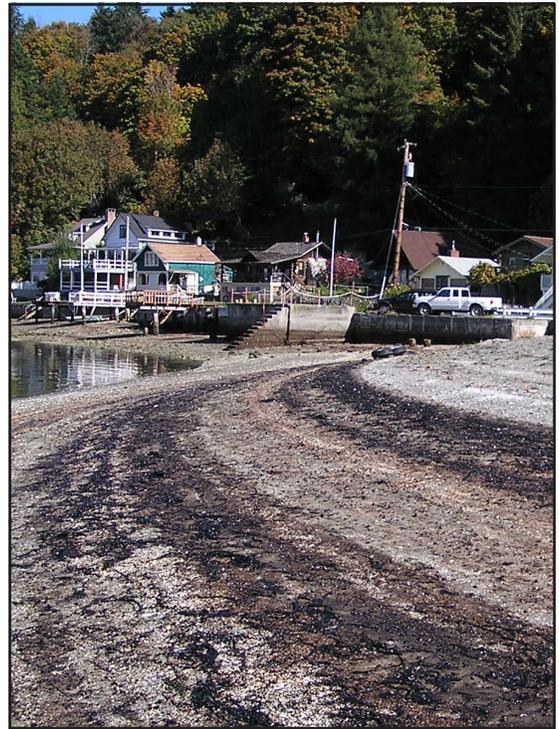
The primary objective of an oil spill response is to ensure the safety of citizens and response personnel. A coordinated effort is launched to maximize protection of environmentally sensitive areas and every effort is made to contain and recover spilled oil. In addition, a professionally trained wildlife rescue team is deployed to capture and rehabilitate any injured wildlife.

Finally, as much oil as possible is removed from impacted areas in order to minimize economic hardship. While all this is happen-

ing, an honest effort is made to keep stakeholders and the public aware of the ongoing events.

Cleaning up after an oil spill is hard work - just ask any of the 280 plus people who showed up to do their part. They preach “PREVENTION” as the best way to avoid environmental damage to the land and water we depend on.

On the other hand, they maintain their readiness to respond to oil spills by doing drills that imitate the real thing. They prepare, and as regulators, they require oil handling facilities to do the same.



Dalco Passage spill hits beaches on Vashon and Maury islands.

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