

Regional Response Team/Northwest Area Committee

Oil Spill Prevention, Planning, and Response Measures

Introduction

Nationwide, the safe shipment of oil and adequate preparedness to respond to an oil spill are top priorities for both industry and government.

Some oil facts:

- The United States consumes over 700 million gallons of oil daily, and U.S. oil imports are projected to grow about 2.2% per year.
- Over half of the oil consumed in the U.S. is imported over sea or land.

The Oil Pollution Act of 1990

The Oil Pollution Act of 1990 (OPA 90), enacted by Congress after the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989, greatly strengthened prevention, planning, response, and restoration efforts. Major provisions of OPA:

- Require vessel and facility owners that handle oil as cargo to develop detailed plans to immediately respond to an oil spill. These plans must: document agreements with oil spill cleanup organizations, be approved by the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) or U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and be tested regularly.
- Require new oil carrying tank barges and tank ships operating in U.S. waters to have double hulls, and requires existing tankers to be phased out of this service over a 25 year period.
- Subject spillers to unlimited liability for gross negligence, willful misconduct, violation of any federal operating or safety standard, failure to report a spill, or failure to participate in the cleanup.
- Established a \$1 billion Oil Spill Liability Trust Fund. The fund ensures that legal or monetary issues do not impede timely spill response or reimbursement for damages. Spillers are responsible for costs paid by the fund.

Spill Response

Black oil spewing from a large oil tanker is a powerful symbol of marine pollution and the human impact on the environment. During a spill, specific steps are taken to meet the challenges presented. For most spills the general goals are to:

- Protect the safety of the public and spill responder.
- Stabilize the source to stop the release of additional oil into the environment.
- Protect sensitive areas to limit the damage caused by the spilled oil.



View from the bridge of a tanker coming into Puget Sound.
Photo: USCG

- Collect and recycle or dispose of oil.
- Rehabilitate wildlife.
- Implement an appropriate cleanup strategy for impacted areas.

The response techniques employed in a spill are dependent upon the product spilled, quantity, location, response time, weather conditions, responder capability, and availability of response equipment. First response efforts are improved by pre-identifying resources at risk, protection priorities, available equipment, and response personnel so that the first response is initiated while incident specific priorities are determined. This pre-spill planning is accomplished by the Area Committees that consist of representatives from federal and state governments, with input from industry, academia, environmental groups, and the community. The Area Committees have written Area Contingency Plans that identify response resources, cleanup strategies, and resources at risk within their jurisdiction. These plans also identify the appropriate conditions for the various spill response techniques, including:

- Mechanical containment and recovery
- Dispersants and other chemical countermeasures
- In-situ burning
- Shoreline cleanup
- Natural removal

To provide the most effective response under the widest range of conditions, oil spill response personnel may use response techniques from multiple categories.