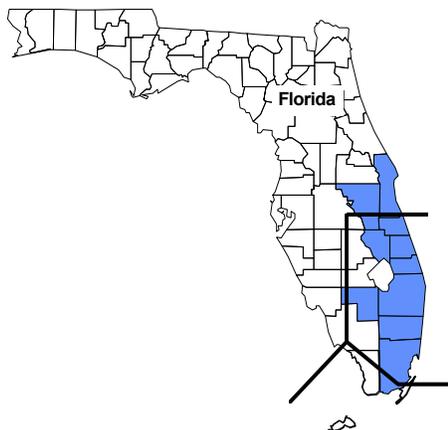


## SOUTH FLORIDA AREA CONTINGENCY PLAN



### Overview

The geographic area covered by the South Florida Area Contingency Plan (ACP) is diverse and delicate. Including three national parks and the world’s third largest living coral reef ecosystem, the area is extremely vulnerable to oil and hazardous material spills. Federal, state, and local government agencies as well as Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPCs) work together to protect this area while continuing to facilitate the heavy flow of maritime traffic. Effective planning features include:

- Establishment of Marine Fire Fighting and Hazardous Material Annexes in the ACP;
- Cooperative and Comprehensive ACP revision process; and
- Participation in the *Sea Partners* environmental education and outreach program.

### Background

The South Florida ACP covers an extensive area that includes three national parks and the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. The marine sanctuary is highly vulnerable to oil spills due to heavy maritime traffic and its close proximity to the Florida Straits. The three national parks in the area (Dry Tortugas, Everglades, and Biscayne) are important wildlife refuges, and any oil spill or hazardous substance release could have dire consequences on the wildlife population.

Created in 1993, the South Florida ACP addresses the growing concern regarding protection of Florida’s national parks. Increasing public interest in such places as the Everglades, Biscayne Bay, and the Florida Keys prompted the creation of a plan that would specifically protect these regions.



#### Planning Committee Profile

- Comprised of fifty active members
- Co-chaired by the Commanding Officer of MSO Miami (as FOOSC) and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (as SOSOC)
- Open to all interested parties

## Coordinated Planning Activities

The South Florida Area Committee is very active in maintaining an effective and workable ACP. The committee is comprised of 50 active members, and is co-chaired by the Commanding Officer, Marine Safety Office (MSO) Miami, as the predesignated federal On-Scene Coordinator (FOSC), and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, as State On-Scene Coordinator (SOSC). Membership is open to all interested agencies, industry groups, and the public. Input from the subcommittees and individual committee members is collated annually by MSO Miami's planning staff and incorporated into the annual update of the ACP.

Proposed changes are

brought before the Area Committee for a final review before their inclusion in the plan. Committee members communicate via phone, facsimile, meetings, and newsletters published by various member organizations.

**Planning.** The South Florida Area Committee adopted the National Interagency Incident Management System Incident Command System (NIIMS ICS) to use as its response model. In addition, the U.S. Coast Guard ICS Field Operations Guide (FOG) has proven invaluable for ICS training and for use during responses. Information from the FOG has been incorporated into the ACP.

## Training & Exercises

**Training.** Training is essential to the South Florida ACP. During training, responders and others work just as they would during an emergency. Also, the incident command system is fully exercised. MSO Miami has hosted ICS training courses sponsored by commercial vendors and the National Strike Force. Training courses are also offered by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in oil spill response and shoreline assessment.

**Exercises.** Exercises are conducted in coordination with the Preparedness for Response Exercise Program (PREP) guidelines. In December, 1996, a major oil spill exercise was conducted in Port Everglades. It included a tabletop scenario and deployment of equipment in the port. The exercise incorporated local contingency plans and all of the relevant local responders. The exercise evaluated the incident command structure and the effectiveness of the South Florida ACP in general. The training exercise included over 200 participants from 25 different organizations and was considered highly successful.



### Significant revisions to the South Florida ACP

- Incorporation of the Federal Region IV pre-approval policy for dispersant use
- Incorporation of the NIIMS ICS
- Addition of a new wildlife rehabilitation section
- Establishment of a new marine fire fighting annex
- Establishment of a new hazardous materials response annex

### Planning Committee Activities

- Subcommittees meet as needed
- Committee as a whole meets quarterly
- Plan is updated yearly
- MSO Miami is responsible for the revision and distribution of the plan
- Committee communicates through meetings, phone, and newsletters

**Outreach.** Active MSO Miami involvement in the *Sea Partners* environmental education and outreach program provides excellent exposure for the South Florida Area Committee's activities. The main goal of *Sea Partners* is to raise public awareness of marine pollution issues. The program allows

the South Florida Area Committee, through MSO Miami, to work with local environmental groups to educate schoolchildren, coordinate beach clean-ups, staff booths at trade shows, and distribute literature to the local boating community. The *Sea Partners* program has been useful and is effective in achieving its goals.

**Hydrographic Surveys.** The South Florida ACP specifies procedures for the use of a series of hydrographic surveys to map bottom depths and contours before a grounded vessel is moved. A hydrographic survey uses side-scanning sonar over several days to chart a path to deep water. Hydrographic surveys are considered critical when a vessel has grounded in the delicate coral reefs of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

**Incident.** On February 2, 1997, the 600-foot container ship M/V CONSHIP HOUSTON ran aground in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. The crew of the HOUSTON attempted unsuccessfully throughout the night to free itself from the coral reef. The hours the vessel spent trying to free itself caused considerable additional damage to the shallow reef line. The HOUSTON was carrying 2,825 gallons of fuel oil that could have spilled. The following morning, the vessel's crew notified MSO Miami of its situation, and a response was initiated in accordance with the South Florida ACP. The response included the MSO, the U.S. Navy (Supervisor of Salvage), the U.S. Coast Guard Gulf Strike Team, NOAA, state and local emergency response agencies, and environmental groups.

**Response.** The first group to arrive on-scene was MSO Miami. They provided the FOSC and established an incident command post at U.S. Coast Guard Group Key West. Divers examined the damage done to the hull of the vessel and the coral reef, and verified that no oil had been spilled. Once the situation had been assessed, response efforts focused on how to remove the HOUSTON while preventing either an oil spill or further damage to the reef.

Public attention during this incident was high, considering that the HOUSTON was the largest vessel ever to ground in the sanctuary. National press conferences were held, and local newspapers gave the incident front-page coverage.

A hydrographic survey was used to determine the best route out of the reef. Responders worked to re-float the container ship by offloading the oil onboard onto another ship. Over 1,700 metric tons of oil were successfully lightered, and the vessel was towed to the Port of Miami for repairs.

**Lesson Learned.** Most of the damage done to the coral reef during the incident probably occurred as the HOUSTON attempted to free itself. Sanctuary officials believe that this is a common occurrence in similar grounding situations. Generally, it is preferable to request assistance before attempting to break free in such a sensitive area. Local area experts and salvage professionals should provide advice on freeing the vessel with minimal damage to the reef. In addition, hydrographic surveys can provide crucial data to reduce damage to reefs. Currently, there are limited regulations concerning this problem. However, the potential for similar accidents remains. To bring attention to the problem, MSO Miami is in the process of preparing articles for several marine journals.

#### Point of Contact



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