

NOAA Web Update June 17, 2010

DEEPWATER HORIZON Incident



Situation: Thursday 17 June

HOUMA, La. – The vacuum barges in Louisiana have been deemed safe to re-join the fight against the oil spill in the Gulf. The vacuum barges were temporarily removed from service after safety concerns occurred, including stability and the lack of lifesaving and firefighting equipment. The Coast Guard Incident Commander in Houma, responsible for the safety of more than 10,000 response workers in Louisiana, and the Coast Guard Captain of the Port of New Orleans, responsible for general vessel safety and inspections in Louisiana, consulted on the safety issues of the shallow water barge vacuum vessels. They are satisfied that all concerns have been addressed and the vessels are safe for all crewmembers aboard. “The Coast Guard supports the Louisiana vacuum barge project - fighting the oil is our priority. However, we will never compromise the safety of all the men and women working so hard out in the field,” said Capt. Roger Laferriere, Coast Guard Incident Commander in Houma.

Response

OR&R’s modeling team continues to generate daily trajectories for the nearshore and offshore surface oil. Overflights are also conducted on a daily basis (weather permitting) to provide field verification of model trajectories. Please see GeoPlatform.gov/gulfresponse for further information on the federal response to the Deepwater Horizon Incident.

Trajectories

Recent satellite imagery analysis no longer shows the persistent patches of sheen to the S-SE of the main slick. However, scattered sheens and tar balls previously observed in these regions may have been entrained into the large clockwise eddy (Eddy Franklin) that has pinched off the main Loop Current (LC). Trajectories indicate that most of these sheens will continue to move clockwise in Eddy Franklin. Some oil may be getting entrained into a counterclockwise eddy to the NE of Eddy Franklin. The connection between the spill source and Eddy Franklin has been cut off due to a change in the currents. The oil will biodegrade and photo-oxidize over the time frame of weeks to months.

The Loop Current is an area of warm water that comes up from the Caribbean, flowing past the Yucatan Peninsula and into the Gulf of Mexico. It generally curves east across the Gulf and then flows south, parallel to the west Florida coast. An eddy is water that rotates.

Closures

NOAA Fisheries Service is not modifying the fishery closure in the Gulf of Mexico today. Any changes to the closure are announced daily at 12 p.m. Eastern at sero.nmfs.noaa.gov and take effect at 6 p.m. Eastern the same day.

Sea Turtles and Marine Mammals (effective June 16, 2010)

The NOAA Ship *Pisces* reported that a dead 25-foot sperm **whale** was located 150 miles due south of Pascagoula, Mississippi and approximately 77 miles due south of the spill site earlier this week. The whale was decomposed and heavily scavenged. Samples of skin and blubber will be analyzed. Sperm whales are the only endangered resident cetacean in the Upper Gulf of Mexico.

A total of 461 **sea turtles** have been verified from April 30 to June 16 within the designated spill area from the Texas/Louisiana border to Apalachicola, Florida. Between Tuesday, June 15, and Wednesday, June 16, 6 turtle strandings were verified, one live turtle in Florida and five dead from Mississippi. The on-water turtle rescue operation led by NOAA, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and other partners working under the Wildlife Branch of the Unified Command captured 6 heavily-oiled turtles Wednesday and brought them ashore for rehabilitation at the Audubon Nature Institute outside New Orleans. There are now 91 sea turtles in rehabilitation centers. These include 66 heavily-oiled sea turtles captured as part of the on-water rescue operation and 26 turtles that stranded alive. A total of 82 stranded or captured turtles have had visible evidence of external oil since verifications began on April 30. These include the 72 captured or collected turtles from the on-water operation (66 live turtles, 3 collected dead and 3 that died in rehabilitation), six live stranded turtles (two caught in skimming operations), and four dead stranded sea turtles. All others have not had visible evidence of external oil.

Of the 461 turtles verified from April 30 to June 16, a total of 355 stranded turtles were found dead, 34 stranded alive. Four of those subsequently died. Four live stranded turtles were released, and 26 live stranded turtles are being cared for at rehabilitation centers. Turtle strandings during this time period have been much higher in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and the Florida Panhandle than in previous years for this same time period. This may be due in part to increased detection and reporting, but this does not fully account for the increase.

From April 30 to June 16, 45 stranded **dolphins** have been verified in the designated spill area, no change from Tuesday, June 15. Of the 45, 43 dolphins stranded dead and two stranded alive. One of those dolphins died on the beach and the other that stranded alive in Florida was euthanized. So far, two of the 45 stranded dolphins had evidence of external oil. However, we are unable at this time to determine whether the animals were externally oiled before or after death. Since April 30, the stranding rate for dolphins in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and the Florida Panhandle has been higher than the historic numbers for the same time period in previous years. In part, this may be due to increased detection and reporting and the lingering effects of an earlier observed spike in strandings for the winter of 2010.

A stranding is defined as a dead or debilitated animal that washes ashore or is found in the water. NOAA and its partners are analyzing the cause of death for the dead stranded and dead captured sea turtles and the stranded marine mammals.

Assessment

NOAA's Damage Assessment, Remediation, and Restoration Program (DARRP) is conducting a [Natural Resource Damage Assessment](#) (PDF, 89 K). The focus currently is to assemble existing data on resources and their habitats and collect baseline (pre-spill impact) data. Data on oiled resources and habitats are also being collected.