

NOAA Web Update June 26, 2010

DEEPWATER HORIZON Incident



Situation: Saturday 26 June –

Oil-spill Response Plan to protect sea turtle nests and hatchlings released

Unified Command Wildlife Branch scientists and partner organizations are implementing an extraordinary plan to protect sea turtle nests and eggs from potential impacts of the Deepwater Horizon/BP oil spill in the northern Gulf of Mexico. The plan, entitled Sea Turtle Late-Term Nest Collection and Hatchling Release Plan, was developed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA-Fisheries), and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWCC), and involves translocation of an anticipated 700 nests in an effort to prevent the loss of the entire cohort of hatchlings. The plan takes a proactive approach to minimize oil-spill impacts by ensuring nests are marked to prevent damage from beach clean-up operations, and by coordinating the collection of nests at a point in the incubation cycle where transport is less likely to result in the loss of viable eggs.

“Permitted nest surveyors have been in the field locating and marking nests daily since the start of the nesting season,” said Sandy MacPherson, FWS national sea turtle coordinator. “Data on the nest location and the date deposited are being closely tracked. This allows us certainty in timing the nest collection phase of the plan.” Once collected, the nests are individually packed in specially prepared Styrofoam boxes and transported by specially equipped ground transportation to a secure, climate-controlled location on the east central coast of Florida where they will remain until incubation is complete.

MacPherson noted that most nests are laid by loggerheads; however, a few nests are also possible from three other sea turtle species – Kemp’s ridley, leatherback, and green turtle. “As hatchlings emerge they will be released on east central Florida beaches where they will be allowed to make their way to the ocean,” said Barbara Schroeder, NOAA Fisheries national sea turtle coordinator. “In developing this plan we realized early on that our expectations for success needed to be realistic,” MacPherson said. “On the one hand the activities identified in the protocols are extraordinary and would never be supportable under normal conditions. However, taking no action would likely result in the loss of all of this year’s Northern Gulf of Mexico hatchlings. This plan applies to nests deposited on Florida Panhandle and Alabama beaches during the 2010 nesting season only as it is this year’s cohort in the Northern Gulf area which is at the highest risk for encountering oil after entering the ocean.

Officials do not intend to implement these protocols elsewhere or in future years in this area.

According to Robbin Trindell with the FWCC’s Imperiled Species Management Branch, oil-spill impacts to nests laid along the Southwest Florida beaches are not likely to result in the loss of the entire 2010 hatchling cohort. “The loggerhead turtles produced on Southwest Florida beaches are part of a larger subpopulation that also nests on Florida’s Atlantic Coast beaches,” Trindell explained. “Thus, the

likelihood that all or a significant portion of this 2010 cohort would be lost is highly improbable.” Officials note that scientists continue to monitor the oil-spill situation and are prepared to consider additional options if and when needed.

The complete plan, along with other wildlife related plans and recommended protocols, is available online at the FWS North Florida Ecological Services Office website - <http://www.fws.gov/northflorida>.

If you observe or find a sea turtle that appears oiled or injured, please immediately call 1-866-557-1401. Individuals are urged not to attempt to help injured or oiled sea turtles, but to report the sightings to the toll-free number. If you are interested in volunteering to aid in the recovery effort, call 1-866-448-5816. Four Gulf-coast states have also set up websites for volunteers; those are available at the FWS website at <http://www.fws.gov/home/dhoilspill/whatyou.html>.

NOAA Response

NOAA provides coordinated scientific weather and biological response services to federal, state, and local organizations. Experts from across the agency have mobilized to help contain the spreading oil spill and protect the Gulf of Mexico’s many marine mammals, sea turtles, fish, shellfish, and other endangered marine life. NOAA spill specialists are advising the U.S. Coast Guard on cleanup options, as well as advising all affected federal, state, and local partners on sensitive marine resources at risk in this area of the Gulf of Mexico. Overflights are conducted on a daily basis (weather permitting) to provide field verification of model trajectories. NOAA’s Office of Marine and Aviation Operations (OMAO) is supporting the response work in the Gulf with NOAA-owned ships and aircraft. Currently, NOAA has deployed five NOAA-owned vessels in response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

Please see GeoPlatform.gov/gulfresponse for further information on the federal response to the Deepwater Horizon/BP Incident.

Trajectories

Winds are forecast to be predominantly easterly (E/ESE) through Monday at speeds of 8-14 knots. The northern edge of the slick continues to move northwest, threatening the barrier islands of Mississippi/Alabama and the Florida Panhandle east to Freeport, Florida. The Chandeleur Islands, Breton Sound, and the Mississippi Delta are also threatened by shoreline contacts in this forecast period. An overflight today observed dark brown oil south of the Delta (within ~7 miles of Southwest pass) -- westward currents are moving oil from this region west towards Terrebonne Bay.

OR&R’s modeling team continues to generate daily trajectories for the nearshore surface oil. The offshore trajectory maps (showing oil interacting with the Loop Current) have been temporarily suspended because the northern end of the Loop Current has been pinched off into a large eddy (Eddy Franklin) so there is no clear path for oil to enter the Loop Current from the source. Also, there have been no reports of recoverable oil in the Loop Current or Eddy Franklin and the oil has moved to the north and away from the Eddy Franklin. We will continue to monitor the area with overflights, vessel observations, and satellite analysis. When the threat of shoreline impacts to the Florida Keys increases, we will resume producing the offshore trajectory maps.

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

The June 23 closure remains in effect ([see map](#)). The federal closed area does not apply to any state waters. Closing fishing in this area is a precautionary measure to ensure that seafood from the Gulf will remain safe for consumers. The closed area now represents 78,597 square miles, which is approximately 32.5 percent of Gulf of Mexico federal waters. This leaves more than two-thirds of Gulf federal waters available for fishing. 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 25, 2010)

A total of 555 **sea turtles** have been verified from April 30 to June 25 within the designated spill area from the Texas/Louisiana border to Apalachicola, Florida. Between Thursday, June 24, and Friday, June 25, 5 turtle strandings were verified (one live in Mississippi, two dead in Mississippi, one dead in Alabama, and one dead from Louisiana). In addition, one live, oiled turtle was captured as part of the on-water search and rescue operation by the Unified Command. There are now 123 sea turtles in rehabilitation centers. These include 87 sea turtles captured as part of on-water survey and rescue operations, and 36 turtles that stranded alive. A total of 97 stranded or captured turtles have had visible evidence of external oil since verifications began on April 30. These include the 85 captured or collected turtles from on-water operations (79 live turtles, 3 found alive that died in rehabilitation and 3 collected dead), six live stranded turtles (two caught in oil skimming operations), and six dead stranded sea turtles. All others have not had visible evidence of external oil.

Of the 555 turtles verified from April 30 to June 25, a total of 417 stranded turtles were found dead, 44 stranded alive. Four of those subsequently died. Four live stranded turtles were released, and 36 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.

The NOAA Ship *Pisces* reported a dead 25-foot sperm **whale** on June 15, 2010, that was located 150 miles due south of Pascagoula, Miss. and approximately 77 miles due south of the spill site last week. The whale was decomposed and heavily scavenged. Samples of skin and blubber have been taken and will be analyzed. The whale had not evidence of external oil. Sperm whales are the only endangered resident cetacean in the Upper Gulf of Mexico. There are no records of stranded whales in the Gulf of Mexico for the month of June for the period 2003-2007.

From April 30 to June 25, 54 stranded **dolphins** have been verified in the designated spill area. Two dead dolphin strandings in Louisiana were verified on June 25. Of the 54 strandings, five were live strandings, three of which died shortly after stranding, one was released, and one is in rehabilitation. Forty-nine dolphins were found stranded dead. Visible evidence of external oil was confirmed on five dolphins, two

live and three dead stranded animals. We are unable at this time to determine whether three of the dead stranded dolphins 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

To help determine the type and amount of restoration needed to compensate the public for harm to natural resources as a result of the spill, a [Natural Resource Damage Assessment](#) (PDF, 90 K) will be conducted by NOAA and our co-trustee agencies. Although many agencies are involved in this process, NOAA is a lead federal trustee for coastal and marine natural resources, including marine and migratory fish, endangered species, marine mammals, and their habitats. 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.