

NOAA Web Update July 17, 2010

DEEPWATER HORIZON Incident



Situation: Saturday 17 July —

“A Whale” Operational Review Completed

NEW ORLEANS - After an extended trial period during which the supertanker skimming vessel, “A Whale,” was given an opportunity to demonstrate its capability to remove oil in open seas of the Gulf of Mexico, Federal On-Scene Coordinator Admiral Paul Zukunft today announced that it will not be deployed as a part of the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill response.

“A Whale,” the 1,115-foot long supertanker that sailed to the United States from Lisbon, Portugal, was modified in an innovative way, and went through an extensive operational review by a multiagency team under the supervision of the U.S. Coast Guard. The report concluded that after significant effort, the amount of oil recovered was negligible, and limited oil beyond a sheen was found in the cargo tanks. Over the same 24-hour testing period, the Unified Area Command mobilized more than 590 smaller, more agile skimmers to remove more than 25,551 barrels of oil water, conducted 26 controlled burns, and recovered 12,800 barrels at the source to continue to fight the oil as far offshore as possible.

“While its stature is impressive, ‘A Whale’ is not ideally suited to the needs of this response,” said Admiral Zukunft. “We appreciate the ingenuity of the TNT team to try to make this innovative system work under these unique conditions. This is the largest oil spill response in our nation’s history and we will continue to attack the oil as far offshore as possible with our fleet of hundreds of skimmers, controlled burns, and effective use of dispersant.”

Because the oil consists of relatively smaller patches and numerous ribbons spread very thinly across a great distance, the mission has required the deployment of smaller skimmers with the agility needed to maneuver and pursue oil in both crowded and open waters.

Since early June, at the direction of National Incident Commander Admiral Thad Allen, the number of skimmers fighting oil in the Gulf has been increased more than fivefold to 593, as of today. There are currently more than total 6,800 vessels responding on site, including skimmers, tugs, barges, and recovery vessels to assist in containment and cleanup efforts—in addition to dozens of aircraft, remotely operated vehicles, and multiple mobile offshore drilling units. Nearly 33 million gallons of an oil-water mix have been recovered and 387 controlled burns have been conducted, efficiently removing an additional 11 million gallons of oil from the open water in an effort to protect shoreline and wildlife.

NOAA Response

- Fact Sheet: [What to Expect in South Florida from the Deepwater Horizon/BP Oil Spill](#)
(Document format: PDF, size: 399.9 K).

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 six 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 Incident.

Trajectories

Persistent onshore winds (SE/S) are forecast through Sunday with speeds of 10-15 knots. Remote sensing imagery and overflights indicate that remaining surface oil is in a northeast-southwest oriented band situated approximately 40 miles off the Mississippi Delta. Trajectories indicate this band will continue to spread both northward and westward over the next few days. Observed floating oil from today's overflights and satellite analysis is not expected to landfall within the forecast period but scattered tarballs may continue to impact previously impacted shorelines.

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 July 13 closure remains in effect. ([See map.](#)) All commercial and recreational fishing including catch and release is prohibited in the closed area; however, transit through the area is allowed. The current closure measures 83,927 square miles (217,371 square kilometers) and covers about 35% of the Gulf of Mexico exclusive economic zone. The majority of federal waters in the Gulf of Mexico are open to commercial and recreational fishing. Modeling and mapping the actual and projected spill area is not an exact science. NOAA Fisheries Service strongly advises fishermen not to fish in areas where oil or oil sheens (very thin layers of floating oil) are present, even if those areas are not currently closed to

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 July 16, 2010)

A total of 674 **sea turtles** have been verified from April 30 to July 16 within the designated spill area from the Texas/Louisiana border to Apalachicola, Florida. Four live oiled turtles were captured and taken to rehabilitation as part of the directed on water operation by the Wildlife Branch of the Unified Area Command. One dead oiled turtle was collected during the on-water operation in addition to a dead oil turtle that stranded in Alabama. These were reported from July 15 and 16. There are 187 live sea turtles in rehabilitation centers. These include 144 sea turtles captured as part of the on-water survey and rescue operations, and 43 turtles that stranded alive. A total of 162 stranded or captured turtles have had visible evidence of external oil since verifications began on April 30. These include 146 that are alive and 16 that are dead. All others have not had visible evidence of external oil.

Of the 674 turtles verified from April 30 to July 16, a total of 464 stranded turtles were found dead, 58 stranded alive. Four of those subsequently died. Eleven live stranded turtles were released, and 43 live stranded turtles are being cared for at rehabilitation centers. This report contains some corrected numbers from earlier reports. 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, Mississippi, 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 July 16, 65 stranded **dolphins** have been verified in the designated spill area. Of the 65 strandings, five were live strandings, three of which died shortly after stranding, one was released and one is in rehabilitation. Sixty dolphins were found stranded dead. Visible evidence of external oil was confirmed on four dolphins. We are unable at this time to determine whether the three 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. This report contains corrections based on new information. The status of one live dolphin was changed from oiled to unoiled based on further evaluation.

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](#) (Document format: PDF, size: 90.8 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. For additional information, see the [DARRP Deepwater Horizon Web page](#).