

# Responding To Oil Spills:

## The National Response System

# 7

### INTRODUCTION

**WHEN A MAJOR** oil spill occurs in the United States, coordinated teams of local, state, and national personnel are called upon to help contain the spill, clean it up, and ensure that damage to human health and the environment is minimized. Without careful planning and clear organization, efforts to deal with large oil spills could be slow, ineffective, and potentially harmful to response personnel and the environment. In the United States, the system for organizing responses to major oil spills is called the *National Response System*. This chapter describes the origins of the National Response System and outlines the responsibilities of the teams and individuals who plan for and respond to major oil spills in navigable waters.

### THE NATIONAL RESPONSE SYSTEM

**UNTIL 1967**, the United States had not formally addressed the potential for major oil or hazardous substance spills. On March 18, 1967, a 970-foot oil tanker, the *Torrey Canyon*, ran aground 15 miles off Land's End, England, spilling 33 million gallons of crude oil that eventually affected more than 150 miles of coastline in England and France. The spill had negative impacts on beaches, wildlife, fishing, and tourism.

Recognizing the possibility of a similar spill in the United States, the federal government sent a team of representatives from different federal agencies to Europe to observe the cleanup activities and bring back lessons learned. Based on what the team learned from the *Torrey Canyon* spill and response, several federal agencies developed the National Oil and Hazardous Substances Pollution Contingency Plan, or *National Contingency Plan* (NCP) for short.

The NCP, which was signed into law on November 13, 1968, established the National Response System, a network

of individuals and teams from local, state, and federal agencies who combine their expertise and resources to ensure that oil spill control and cleanup activities are timely, efficient, and minimize threats to human health and the environment.

The three major components of the National Response System are the (1) *On-Scene Coordinators*, (2) *National Response Team*, and (3) *Regional Response Teams*. A fourth component, *Special Forces*, are organizations with special skills and knowledge that can be called upon to support a response.

The National Response System is activated when the *National Response Center* receives notification of an oil spill. The National Response Center, located in Washington, D.C., is one of the first organizations to be notified when an oil spill occurs. It is staffed by officers and marine science technicians from the U.S. Coast Guard, and serves as the national communications center responsible for notifying On-Scene Coordinators (OSCs) who oversee cleanup efforts at a spill site.

### ON-SCENE COORDINATORS

**ON-SCENE COORDINATORS** have the most prominent role in the National Response System. They are federal officials responsible for directing response actions and coordinating all other efforts at the scene of a discharge or spill. In addition, OSCs work in partnership with other federal, state, local, and private response agencies. OSCs' duties also include providing support and information to regional response committees.

Four federal agencies have staff that serve as OSCs: the Coast Guard, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the U.S. Department of Energy, and the U.S.

Department of Defense. Among these agencies, the Coast Guard and EPA have the greatest responsibility for responding to oil spill emergencies. There are 48 OSCs in the Coast Guard and 215 OSCs in EPA. OSCs are stationed in locations across the country to allow for quick and efficient response to spills. When a spill occurs in coastal waters, the local Coast Guard Port Commander is the OSC. When a spill occurs in an inland area, such as a spill from a pipeline or rail tank car, a regional EPA official is assigned as the OSC. The OSC is responsible for four main tasks during an oil spill response: (1) assessment, (2) monitoring, (3) response assistance, and (4) reporting.

### **Assessment**

As part of a response to a spill, an OSC must evaluate the size and nature of a spill and its potential hazards. The OSC who is in charge also estimates the resources needed to contain the oil and clean it up and assesses the ability of the responsible party or local authorities to handle the incident. Collectively these activities are called assessment. OSCs typically conduct assessment activities at the beginning of a response. The assessment determines the need for personnel, equipment, and other resources to promptly and effectively combat the spill.

### **Monitoring**

Throughout an oil spill response, OSCs monitor the actions being taken to control and clean up a spill to make sure they are appropriate. All spills of a legally defined minimum size must be monitored by an OSC, even though most spills are small and are cleaned up by the responsible party or local fire or police departments. Monitoring can be conducted from the site when necessary, or from an agency office if the situation appears to be under control.

### **Response Assistance**

Once a spill has been assessed, an OSC determines whether federal assistance will be necessary to help control and contain the spill. If an OSC decides that federal assistance is required, he or she will obtain needed resources such as personnel and equipment. If sufficient resources are not available at or near the spill site, an OSC can secure them using a special fund—the Oil Spill Liability Trust Fund—that the federal government established for this purpose. (See the box on this page for more information). The fund is intended to ensure that oil spill cleanups will not be hindered by a lack of personnel or equipment.

### **Reporting**

As required by the NCP, OSCs report all activities that take place during and after a spill. For example, following a spill, the OSC is required to file a summary report that outlines the actions taken to remedy the spill and the level of assistance provided by local, state, and federal agencies.

## ***THE OIL SPILL LIABILITY TRUST FUND***

**THE COMPANY** or individual responsible for an oil spill—known as a responsible party—is legally responsible for expenses related to containment and cleanup of the spill. However, when the responsible party is unable to pay for cleanup, funds from the Oil Spill Liability Trust Fund can be used to pay for removal costs or damages resulting from discharges of oil into U.S. waters. Up to one billion dollars from the Fund may be expended on a spill incident. The Fund, created by Congress in 1990, is administered by the U.S. Coast Guard. The money comes from a five-cent per barrel fee on oil.

These reports can be used to identify problem areas and improve spill response plans. They can also be shared with other agencies who may make recommendations about how to respond more effectively in future incidents or how to prevent more spills.

### **Planning**

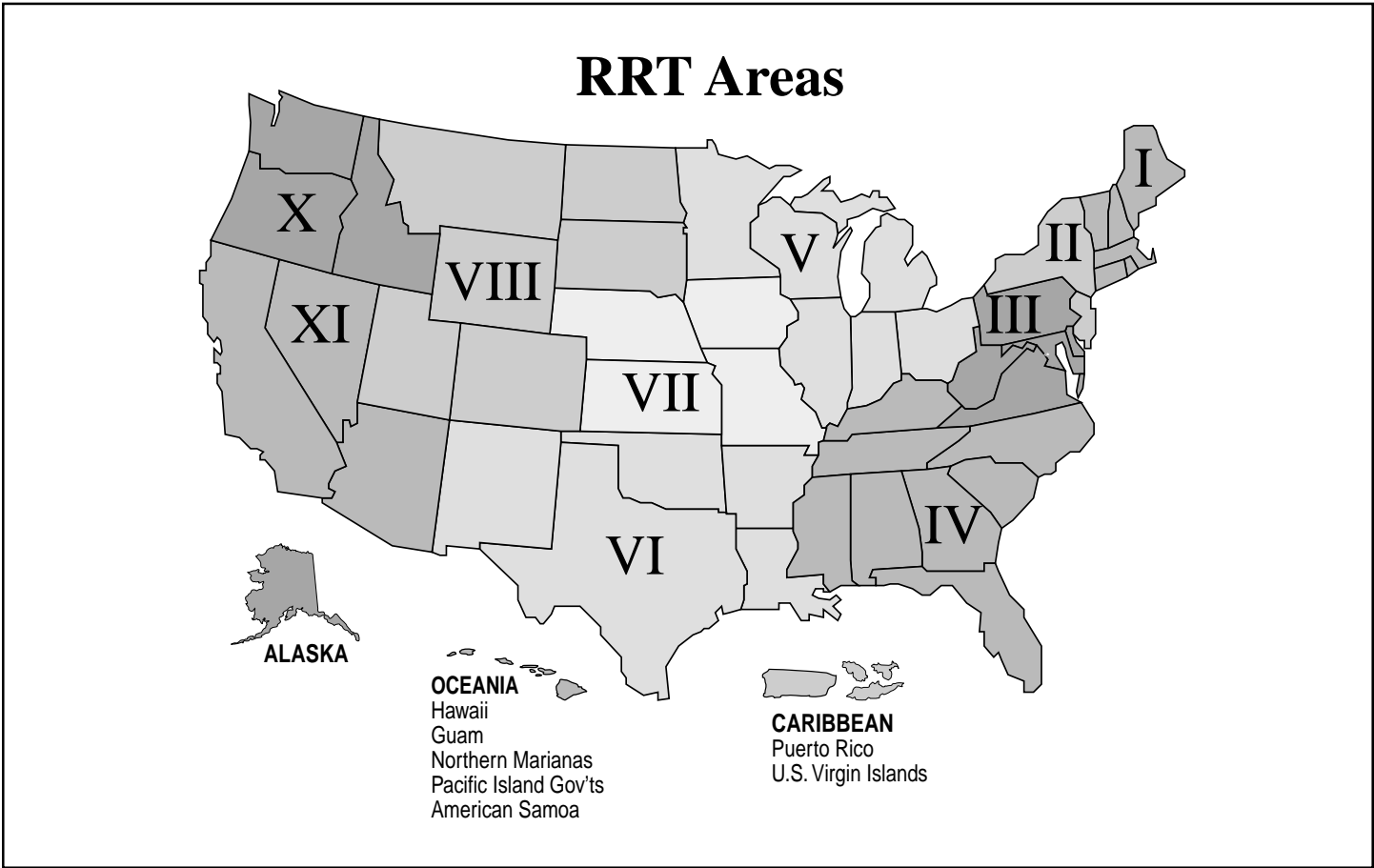
Under the NCP guidelines, OSCs also participate in the inland/coastal area planning committees. These committees support the OSC in preparing area contingency plans for emergency incidents. (Chapter six discusses contingency planning in greater detail.)

## ***REGIONAL RESPONSE TEAMS***

**REGIONAL RESPONSE TEAMS (RRTs)** are another major component of the National Response System. There are 13 RRTs in the United States, each representing a particular geographic region of the United States (including Alaska, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Basin). RRTs are composed of representatives from states and from field offices of the federal agencies that make up the National Response Team. The RRTs provide assistance when it is requested by OSCs and may respond on-scene. The four major responsibilities of RRTs are (1) response, (2) planning, (3) training, and (4) coordination.

### **Response**

Regional Response Team members do not respond directly to spills like OSCs do, but they may be called upon to provide technical advice, equipment, or manpower to assist with a response. RRTs provide a forum for federal agency field offices and state agencies to exchange information about their abilities to respond to OSCs' requests for assistance.



**Planning**

Each RRT develops a Regional Contingency Plan to ensure that during an actual oil spill the roles of federal and state agencies are clear. Following an oil spill, the RRT reviews the OSC’s reports to identify problems with the Region’s response to the incident and improves the plan as necessary.

**Training**

Regional Response Teams provide simulation exercises of regional plans to test the abilities of federal, state, and local agencies to coordinate their responses to oil spills. Any major problems identified as a result of these exercises may be addressed and changed in the Regional Contingency Plans so the same problems do not arise during an actual oil spill response.

**Coordination**

The RRTs are responsible for identifying the resources available from each federal agency and state in their regions. Such resources include equipment, guidance, training, and technical expertise for dealing with oil spills. When there are too few resources in a Region, the RRT can request assistance from federal or state authorities to ensure that sufficient resources will be available during a spill. This coordination by the RRTs ensures that resources

are used as wisely as possible and that no Region is lacking what it needs to protect human health and the environment from the effects of an oil spill.

**THE NATIONAL RESPONSE TEAM**

**THE THIRD MAJOR** component of the National Response System is the National Response Team (NRT). It is an organization composed of 16 federal agencies, each of which has responsibilities in environmental areas and expertise in various aspects of emergency response to pollution incidents. EPA serves as the NRT’s chair and the Coast Guard serves as the vice chair. Although the NRT does not respond directly to incidents, it is responsible for three major activities relating to managing oil spill response: (1) distributing information, (2) planning for emergencies, and (3) training for emergencies.

**Distributing information**

The NRT is responsible for ensuring that technical, financial, and operational information about oil spills is available to all members of the team. NRT committees focus attention on specific issues, then collect and disseminate information on those issues to other members of the team.

## ***NATIONAL AND REGIONAL RESPONSE TEAM MEMBER AGENCIES***

**ONE REPRESENTATIVE** from each of the following 16 federal agencies sits on the NRT. The RRTs are composed of representatives from the field offices of these agencies along with representatives from each state within the Region.

Environmental Protection Agency	Department of Justice
Coast Guard	Department of Labor
Department of Agriculture	Department of State
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration	Department of Transportation
Department of Defense	Federal Emergency Management Agency
Department of Energy	General Services Administration
Department of Health and Human Services	Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Department of the Interior	Department of the Treasury

### **Planning for Emergencies**

The NRT ensures that the roles of federal agencies on the team for oil spill emergency response are clearly outlined in the NCP. After a major spill event, the effectiveness of the response is carefully assessed by the NRT. The NRT may use information gathered from the assessment to make recommendations for improving the NCP and the National Response System. The NRT may be asked to help Regional Response Teams (see below) develop Regional Contingency Plans. The NRT also reviews these plans to ensure that they comply with federal policies on emergency response.

### **Training for Emergencies**

One important aspect of any emergency response is preparedness, which is best developed by training. Although most training is actually performed by state and local personnel, the NRT develops training courses and programs, coordinates federal agency training efforts, and provides information to regional, state, and local officials about training needs and courses.

### **Supporting RRTs**

The NRT supports RRTs by reviewing Regional Contingency Plans and ensuring that they are consistent with national policies on oil spill cleanup. The NRT also supports RRTs by monitoring and assessing RRT effectiveness during an oil spill cleanup activity. The NRT may ask an RRT to focus on specific lessons learned from an incident and to share those lessons with other members of the National Response System. In this way, the RRTs can improve their own Regional Contingency Plans while helping to solve problems that might occur elsewhere within the National Response System.

### ***SPECIAL FORCES***

**SPECIAL FORCES** are national resources with unique expertise. When responders face difficult problems, they can call on special forces for assistance. The NCP designates five special force components: (1) the Coast Guard National Strike Force (NSF), (2) the Coast Guard Public Information Assist Team (PIAT), (3) the EPA Environmental Response Team (ERT), (4) the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Scientific Support Coordinators (SSCs), and (5) National Resource Trustees.

#### **National Strike Force**

The NSF provides specially trained personnel equipped to handle major oil spills and chemical releases and maintains a national inventory of spill response equipment. In addition, the NSF aids development and implementation of exercises and training for the National Response System.

#### **Public Information Assist Team**

The PIAT is a team of skilled public affairs specialists that supplements the existing public information capabilities of OSCs.

#### **Environmental Response Team**

The scientists and engineers who make up the ERT provide expertise in sampling and analysis, hazard assessment, cleanup techniques, and technical support.

#### **Scientific Support Coordinators**

Scientific Support Coordinators lead the scientific teams that provide support to OSCs in the areas of chemistry, natural resources, pollutant transport modeling, contingency planning, and environmental tradeoffs. SSCs also serve as liaisons to natural resources trustees and the scientific community.

## Natural Resource Trustees

Natural Resource Trustees are federal, state, or tribal officials who act on behalf of the public for resources under their control. They are important to oil spill response because they often have special knowledge and technical expertise about areas where oil is spilled. Trustees also cooperate with the OSC in coordinating assessments, investigations, planning, and response.

### ***SUMMARY***

**THE NATIONAL** Response System is the mechanism established by the federal government to respond to discharges of oil into navigable waters of the United States. This system functions through a cooperative network of federal, state, and local agencies. The primary mission of the system is to provide support to state and local response activities.

The major components of the National Response System are the On-scene Coordinators, the National Response Team, and the 13 Regional Response Teams, with supplementary support from Special Forces. These individuals and teams work together to develop detailed contingency plans to outline responses to oil spill emergencies before they occur and to develop or engage in training that prepares responders for actual emergencies. During oil spill events, they cooperate to ensure that all necessary resources such as personnel and equipment are available and that containment, cleanup, and disposal activities are timely, efficient, and effective. Four Special Forces components provide specialized support to OSCs during spill response. It is through this cooperation that the National Response System protects human health and the environment from potential harm from oil spills in navigable waters.