



Oil Spills and the Public

When a disaster occurs, people want to help. Often, this is exactly what is needed in a crisis. However, sometimes the presence of untrained people, however well-meaning, really does not help, and it can even make things worse. This is especially true in the case of an oil spill.

A barge runs aground on a beach, a ship slams into a bridge and suddenly oil pours into the water and on the shore. Depending on many factors like the type of oil and the weather, many things can happen next.

If waterfowl come in contact with the heavier oils, their feathers become coated in oil, and they cannot keep warm or stay afloat. They cannot swim, so they hide on the shore. These vulnerable birds panic when approached by people, and their attempts to flee can result in physical injury.

Bottom-dwelling creatures -- flounder, lobsters, clams, sea stars -- can die from ingesting oil. They wash up onto the shore or roll out to sea with the tide. Beach sands and tidal flats can absorb

the oil, and the tiny creatures living in them die from ingestion or lack of air. Every human footstep further compacts the ground, forcing air out of the sediment and driving the oil deeper, harming more of the tiny creatures' habitat.

In any case, an oil spill emergency is no place for onlookers. Everyone wants to help, but not everyone can. Untrained people can actually harm the natural resources they want to help and may even harm themselves while trying, through exposure to the oil and its toxic fumes.

Crowds of people at a spill site divert the attention of law enforcement personnel, adding to the drain on emergency resources and confusion at the site. Wildlife or anything oiled may present a serious human health risk and should only be handled by trained experts.

Organized spill response teams, consisting of representatives from federal and state agencies, local groups, and various industries respond to oil spills.

On the federal level, the U.S. Coast Guard takes the lead for coastal spills, while the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has the lead for inland spills. The appropriate state natural resource agencies are active at all spills.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, working in cooperation with federal and state natural resource authorities, responds to the danger and injury

presented by spilled oil to plants and animals and their habitats.

Trained responders try to keep oil away from animals and marshes with floating barriers called booms. They try to haze or encourage oiled animals, usually waterfowl, to move to safe areas away from the spill.

A rescue and treatment center is set up for animals injured by spilled oil. Oiled animals need trained people to collect, clean and rehabilitate them in a facility with space, ventilation, controlled temperature, and hot and cold water. Professional bird rescue organizations often have volunteers who have been trained in advance for oil spills.

So what can you do?

- Please, stay away from the spill area.
- Do not approach or touch an oiled bird or animal. Listen for announcements of a Wildlife Hotline and call that number with the animal's location.
- Watch for media announcements to learn if volunteers or donations of materials or money are needed for animal rehabilitation.

For more information, contact:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
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Hadley, MA 01035-9589
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<http://www.fws.gov>