

Swanson Creek Marsh Incident:
The Challenges of Wildlife
Response on a River

Freshwater Spills Symposium

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Incident History

- On 7 April 2000, a rupture occurred in the pipeline supplying the Chalk Point Generating Station of the Potomac Electric Power Company (PEPCO)
- Supplies No. 6 fuel oil; at time of incident line was being cleaned using No. 2 fuel oil
- Approximately 126,000 gallons of oil released (combination of No. 6 & 2 oils)

Incident Location

- Aquasco, Prince George's County, Maryland
- Swanson Creek, including tidal marsh
- Swanson Creek feeds into the Patuxent River



Incident Evolution

- Initially contained within the creek using redundant booms
- Severe storm on the night of 8 April 2000
- Oil breached booms, spreading ~ 17 miles down river and impacting ~ 40 miles of shoreline



Incident Evolution

- Emergency response phase: 7 April to 16 May 2000
 - > 800 responders daily during initial weeks
 - utilized more than 80 boats daily
 - wildlife assessment teams formed quickly
- Long term clean-up currently ongoing



Wildlife Assessment Teams

- Teams assigned areas by Wildlife Branch Director (USFWS)
- Teams initiated rapidly
- Surveyed wildlife in the area
 - clean, oiled and carcasses
- Focused retrieval efforts

Communications

- Phones (hard lines)
- Pagers
- Cellular phones
- Radios
 - two channels



Transportation

- Vehicles
 - live animal transport
 - carcass / cooler transport
- Boats
 - airboats
 - flat bottom skiffs
 - kayaks



Access

- Local road pattern
- One bridge
- Residential areas
 - retrieval efforts often required multiple permissions for access
- Habitat sensitivity



Resources at Risk

- Shoreline Types

- marsh
- sand
- shrub and grass
- riprap
- man-made
 - commercial marinas
 - residential



Resources at Risk



- Wildlife
 - shellfish
 - fish
 - herpatiles
 - birds
 - mammals

Species of Special Interest

- **Bald Eagle**
(*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)
- **Osprey**
(*Pandion haliaetus*)
- **Great Blue Heron**
(*Ardea herodias*)
- **Diamondback Terrapin**
(*Malaclemys terrapin*)

Bald Eagle

- Federally listed species
- Nesting with chicks
- No-fly zone requested
- Monitoring program by USFWS



Great Blue Heron

- Rookery within spill zone
- High sensitivity to disturbance
- Nesting with eggs
- Monitoring program by USFWS & PEPCO



Diamondback Terrapin



- High profile species
- Commercial fishery
- Pre-existing long term study area within spill zone
- Lay eggs in the sandy shorelines
- NRDAR topic

Osprey

- Highly visible species
- Significant local population
- Nesting with eggs
- PEPCO had pre-existing monitoring program



Osprey

- Special rehabilitation protocol developed to address nesting status
 - trapped on nest
 - eggs
 - medical evaluation
 - expedited cleaning
 - banded & released
- High nest site competition



TSBRR

Other Notable Species

- Semi-domestic and hybrid waterfowl
- Muskrats (*Ondatra zibethica*)
 - permit requirements, severely affected
- Mute swans (*Cygnus olor*)
 - invasive species, proposed population control program, public interest

Release

- Emergency clean-up phase lasted ~ 5 wks
- Animals rehabilitated and ready for release by 20 April only 2 weeks into the response
- Habitat considerations for release discussed with PEPCO, wildlife trustees and wildlife rehabilitators
- Joint Information Center, community outreach and public education

Release - species notes

- Ruddy ducks (*Oxyura jamaicensis*)
 - migration allows for consideration of alternative release sites
- Resident waterfowl
- Reptiles
 - return to retrieval location important
 - mud turtles from Swanson Creek relocated

Conclusion

- River spills can consume large amounts of response resources
- Wildlife assessment teams beneficial in focusing wildlife efforts
- Wildlife resource monitoring programs important part of overall wildlife response