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RESTORATION BEGINS FOR *T/V WESTCHESTER* OIL SPILL

Federal and Louisiana agencies settled with Marine Oil Trader 3, Ltd. and Ermis Maritime Corp. for the November 2000 *T/V Westchester* oil spill into the Mississippi River in Plaquemines Parish, La. With oversight from the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), U.S. Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Louisiana Oil Spill Coordinator's Office, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources, and the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality, the responsible parties will begin implementing restoration projects to address the resources injured by the spill.

On Nov. 28, 2000, the *T/V Westchester* grounded in the Mississippi River at River Mile 38, discharging approximately 500,000 gallons of crude oil into the Mississippi River downstream from New Orleans in Plaquemines Parish, La. The incident resulted in injuries to fish and shellfish, birds, and lost fishing and hunting opportunities.

While response agencies contained the oil and cleaned the area, NOAA, the USFWS, the Louisiana Oil Spill Coordinator's Office, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources, and the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality acted as trustees on behalf of the public to conduct a natural resource damage assessment to identify and restore injured natural resources.

"By working cooperatively throughout the assessment, the agencies and the responsible party reached an agreement for restoration more efficiently," said Richard W. Spinrad, assistant administrator for the NOAA National Ocean Service. "Working together on natural resource damage assessments benefits industry, the affected community, and, most importantly, the environment."

Under the terms of the settlement agreement, Marine Oil Trade 3, Ltd. and Ermis Maritime Corp., with trustee agency oversight, will implement a marsh restoration project in the Pass-a-Loutre State Wildlife Management Area, south of Venice, La., that will grow to an expected 20 acres in size, with potential growth to 100 acres. The project involves making a cut (crevasse splay) in the riverbank, which will allow the natural process of sedimentation and vegetative colonization to occur and form marsh in the Mississippi River Delta. The marsh will provide critical nursery habitat for shrimp, fish, and other aquatic species, nesting and foraging habitat for birds and other wildlife, and enhanced opportunities for fishing and hunting.

“Whether it was developing injury study plans or identifying restoration projects, we shared information and made joint decisions,” explained Gary Mauseth of Polaris Applied Sciences, Inc., a representative of the responsible parties. “With this level of cooperation, we achieved our goal more quickly—restoring the natural resources.”

In addition to the ecological restoration project, Marine Oil Trader 3, Ltd. and Ermis Maritime Corp. will construct a multipurpose dock to enhance hunting, fishing, and recreational opportunities at the Pass-a-Loutre State Wildlife Management Area near the Freshwater Reservoir.

“Our goal was to compensate the citizens of the State for injuries to our natural resources. Implementing these restoration projects will enable us to accomplish our goal,” said Roland Guidry with the Oil Spill Coordinator’s Office.

The goal of a natural resource damage assessment is to restore the natural resources and services injured by an oil release. Under the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, federal and state agencies determine the nature and extent of natural resource injuries, select appropriate restoration projects, and implement or oversee restoration.

NOAA’s National Ocean Service balances environmental protection with economic prosperity in fulfilling its mission of promoting safe navigation, supporting coastal communities, sustaining coastal habitats and mitigating coastal hazards.

The Commerce Department’s National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources.

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