



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Our Role in Coastal Oil Spill Response

## Alaska Region



### Did you know?

- Alaska averaged 2,247 oil spills per year between 1996 and 2002.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists work year round to prepare for oil spills.
- Rehabilitated oiled birds can thrive and reproduce in the wild.

*Part of the Department of Interior, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has trust responsibility for many of the nation's fish and wildlife resources. The Oil Pollution Act of 1990 requires our agency to respond to spills and to seek restoration of injured resources.*



C. Stock/ADFG

*Oiled bird carcass lifted from oil mat, Unalaska Island, Alaska..*

### Behind the Scenes

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) biologists work year round to prepare for oil spills. For example, biologists meet with staff from other agencies and organizations involved in spills to develop and improve response plans and procedures to ensure that activities at the next spill will be well coordinated and effective.

Biologists from the USFWS and other federal and state resource agencies locate and survey fish and wildlife habitat and other natural resources vulnerable to a coastal oil spill. These natural resource inventories become part of the governments' Area Contingency Plans. Then, if a spill does occur, the response agencies know the area's natural resources and can set priorities for protection.

### When a Spill Happens

The U.S. Coast Guard coordinates response activities at coastal oil spills. When the Coast Guard is notified of a spill, it contacts the appropriate local, state, health, and emergency officials, and natural resource trustees, including the Department of the Interior, about the location and extent of the spill. The Department of the Interior then notifies the appropriate USFWS staff to evaluate the spill size and its potential effects on resources, and decide if and how the agency will respond.

*As mandated by OPA '90, the USFWS is required to pursue the "immediate and effective protection, rehabilitation of, and the minimization of risk of damage to, fish and wildlife and habitat that are harmed...by a discharge."*

The USFWS does not mobilize for every oil spill; thousands of spills occur in Alaska every year. Service personnel only respond to spills that



A. Sowls/USFWS

*Oiled Harlequin Duck, Unalaska Island, Alaska.*

impact, or could potentially impact, their trust resources, which include migratory birds, sea otters, walrus, polar bears, some species of fish, and National Wildlife Refuge lands.

When USFWS biologists arrive at a spill, they report to the Coast Guard's Incident Command Center. They join staff from other federal and state resource agencies and begin assessing the threats to fish, wildlife, and habitats used by these species. Throughout the response effort,



USFWS

*Oiled sea otter, Prince William Sound, Alaska.*

the USFWS, through the incident command system, works to minimize the impact of the spill on these natural resources.



USFWS

*Oiled Steller's Eider carcass, Unalaska Island, Alaska.*

#### Activities At a Spill

Many USFWS biologists may be involved in a significant oil spill. Some will begin by identifying the natural resources-at-risk within the spill zone and recommending appropriate protection measures to the Incident Command. Some biologists will concentrate their efforts on keeping wildlife away from the spill area by applying various deterrent techniques, such as hazing. Others will search for and collect oiled wildlife carcasses to prevent them from becoming secondary oiling sources to animals such as eagles and foxes which may feed on them. USFWS biologists will also assist with the recovery of live oiled wildlife and oversee the setup and operation of wildlife stabilization and treatment centers.



J. Holcomb/IBRRC

*Oiled goldeneye ducks at a rehabilitation center.*

Still other biologists will begin surveying the spill's effects on wildlife habitat and advise the responders on measures needed to protect sensitive shoreline habitats from oil contamination. USFWS biologists will also participate in Shoreline Cleanup Assessment Techniques (SCAT) surveys, provide advice on methods of shoreline cleanup, and recommend ecological constraints, or actions, that will minimize any further harm to sensitive resources during cleanup operations.



S. Lehman/NOAA

*Spill response agencies collaborate on SCAT, Unalaska Island, Alaska.*

On another front, USFWS law enforcement officers team up with other response agency law enforcement staff to investigate potential criminal acts and to assist with crowd control, as needed. Law enforcement staff are also responsible for maintaining custody of all recovered oiled wildlife carcasses.

Still other personnel within the USFWS help keep the media and public informed about the spill's effects on fish and wildlife.

#### The Work Continues

Another important aspect of the USFWS work begins after the spill is under control. Agency biologists then begin assessing the full extent of impacts from the spill, determining what natural resources

were exposed and what injury the oil caused to those natural resources and to the people that use and enjoy those resources. This process typically involves sampling and field surveys and can take many months. Biologists will use this information to work with those responsible for the spill, and other natural resource trustees, to seek compensation for lost or injured resources, and restore the natural resources impacted by the spill.

#### Rats!

Even more devastating than the long term effects of an oil spill, can be the effects of a rat invasion from a shipwreck on remote, rat-free islands with seabird nesting colonies. Many island-nesting bird species, particularly colony nesters, do not have natural defenses against rat predation and may be wiped out when an island is invaded by rats unless a successful rat response can be immediately employed. In Alaska, the USFWS maintains a Shipwreck Response Plan and a Rat Response Strike Team. In the event of a vessel grounding, the plan describes how the Service will work with the Coast Guard to implement an emergency rodent control response effort. The strike team is trained in remote island access, rat biology and behavior, and proper control methods. The USFWS believes that stopping rodent introductions immediately is an ecologically sound and cost-effective conservation strategy.



NWRC

*Shipwrecked rats are a threat to Alaska's wildlife.*

For more information please contact:

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