U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Our Role in Coastal Oil Spill Response

Alaska Region

Did you know?

- **There were 2,116 oil spills reported in Alaska in 1999.**
- **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 is the federal agency responsible for many of the nation's fish and wildlife resources. Having this responsibility has established the agency as one of the primary trustees for fish, wildlife, and habitat at oil spills.

Collecting oiled king eiders, St. Paul, AK. USFWS

Behind the Scenes

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 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 fine tune response plans and procedures to ensure that activities at the next spill will be well coordinated.

Also, biologists from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other federal and state resource agencies locate and survey fish and wildlife habitat and other natural resources vulnerable to a coastal oil spill. This natural resource inventory becomes 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.

Swinging Into Action

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 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff who evaluate the spill size and its potential effects on resources, and decide if and how the agency will respond.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service does not show up at every oil spill; thousands of spills occur in Alaska every year. Service personnel only respond to spills that impact, or could potentially impact, their trust resources, which include migratory birds, sea otters, walrus, polar bears, and National Wildlife Refuge lands.

Oiled sea otter, Prince William Sound, AK. USFWS

When U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 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, the Service, through the incident command system, works to minimize the impact of the spill upon these natural resources.

Activities At the Spill

Many U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists may be involved in a

Oiled king eiders, St. Paul, AK. USFWS

significant oil spill. Some will concentrate their efforts on keeping wildlife away from the spill area. Others will assist with recovering oiled wildlife and oversee the setup and operation of wildlife treatment centers.

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 and provide advice on methods of cleanup.

On another front, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 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.

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

The Work Continues

Another important aspect of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's 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, and subsequent response, 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.

Oiled loon, Prince William Sound, AK.

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March 2001