

NW Readiness for Oil Spills Drops As Risks Increase

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Contributed by Ashley Ahearn, Bonnie Stewart



- The Oregon Responder releases boom during an oil spill preparedness drill in the Columbia River. credit: Bonnie Stewart



- The crew of the Oregon Responder maneuvers an oil skimmer in the Columbia River during an oil spill preparedness drill. credit: Bonnie Stewart



- Ernie Quesada, general manager for Clean Rivers Cooperative, oversees an oil spill drill on the Columbia River. credit: Bonnie Stewart

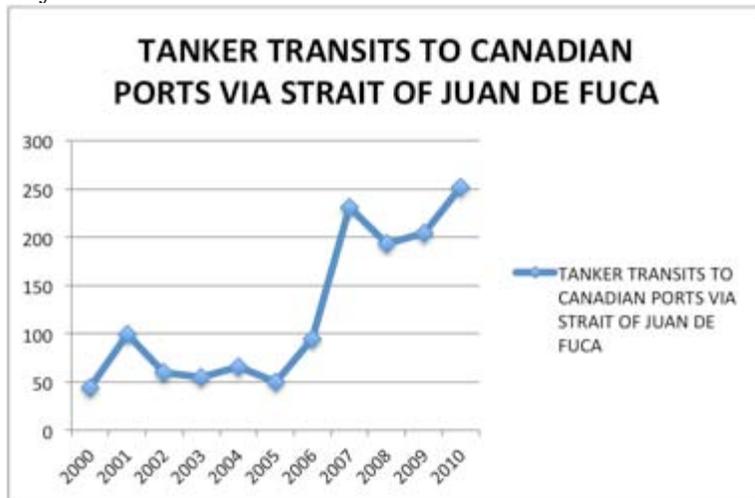


- Weather conditions changed several times during an oil spill drill on the Columbia River. credit: Bonnie Stewart

Every year, vessels carry more than [15 billion](#) of gallons of oil and fuel through Pacific Northwest waters, putting Washington and Oregon at constant risk of spills that could cripple parts of their economies and devastate marine life and environmentally sensitive shorelines. A major spill at the mouth of the Columbia River or in the Strait of Juan de Fuca could cost Washington state 165,000 jobs and \$10.8 billion in economic losses, said Curt Hart, communications manager, Washington Department of Ecology.

Avoiding calamity requires readiness resources. Yet as oil tanker traffic is rising, Washington's oil spill program is facing budget cuts. It lost 7 of its 77 full-time staff positions during the 2009-2011 biennium and expects cuts to its \$29 million two-year budget in the next biennium.

Most of the new tanker traffic comes from the Alberta oil sands industry, which pipes oil into Canadian ports and pumps it into tanker ships that carry it through the [Strait of Juan De Fuca](#) on the way to Asia.



Source: *Washington Department of Ecology*

Plans for a second pipeline into Canadian ports could add even more traffic, but the added risk is not offset by Canada because the crude oil from Canadian ports is not subject to taxes that fund Washington's spill programs, Hart said.

The risk is great, too. Each tanker can carry about 36 million gallons of crude oil and another million gallons of heavy bunker fuel to power the ship, Hart said. Should a tanker run aground it would meet a rough landing on a rocky shoreline, and depending on the conditions, even a double hull could be breached.

"In the blink of an eye, a mistake could be made and we would have a disaster," Hart said.

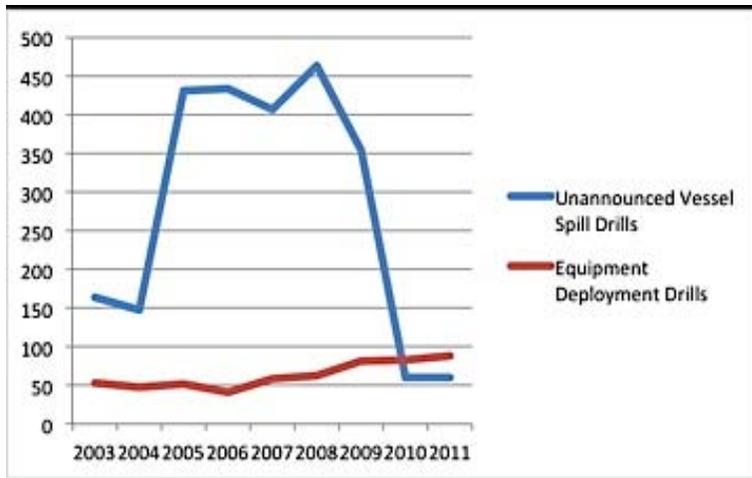
PREPARING FOR SPILLS

Both Oregon and Washington require every company that operates ships in their waters to develop a plan it would follow during an oil spill. In that plan, company officials must list a "primary response contractor" they would call to handle a clean up. The states also require the companies to demonstrate that their plans will work by completing oil spill drills — equipment deployment drills on the water or tabletop drills on land.

WASHINGTON STATE DRILLS TAKE A HIT

In the past, Washington officials performed hundreds of unannounced drills with individual vessels each year. But the number of those visits has dropped significantly during the past two years. This year, the department estimates it will oversee about 55 unannounced vessel drills.

Surprise Spill Drills Decline



Source: Washington Department of Ecology

Unannounced major spill drills have disappeared completely. Ecology oversaw eight of them in 2005, but hasn't performed any since 2007. They required 15 to 20 Ecology staffers from several department to drop what they were doing and do the drill.

"It's very hard to do one of those with the resources we have," Hart said.

The Department of Ecology has shifted its focus to drills everyone knows are coming. Those planned equipment deployment drills have more than doubled since 2006, from 41 drills to 88 in 2011.

A SPILL TEAM TESTS ITS EQUIPMENT

View [Strait of Juan de Fuca](#) in a larger map

Julie Knight is part naval commander, part mother hen and director of the Island Oil Spill Association — a nonprofit primary response contractor that cleans up spills in the San Juan Islands.

On a recent Saturday, she gathered about 30 volunteers on Lopez Island for an equipment deployment drill in Fisherman's Bay.

“If people need anchors let me know,” she said.

Knight laid out the plans for the drill and the group broke into four teams that spread out around the bay. Each boat was loaded with equipment and hundreds of feet of boom – those floating yellow curtains that corral oil and keep it away from sensitive parts of the shoreline.

“We’ve been doing this since 1988, and we’ve only had one year that we haven’t had a response,” she said.

The people participating in this drill have come from the surrounding islands. They’re carpenters and fishermen, retirees and teenagers, and most of them are not getting paid to be here. The boats, and the people driving them, are an eclectic mix.

The Island Oil Spill Association is a low-budget non-profit set up mainly to handle smaller-scale spills. They don’t have large skimming boats or miles of boom needed for something like the Exxon Valdez or BP Deepwater Horizon disasters.

But if a spill were to occur in the San Juan Islands, Knight and her team probably would be the first on the scene, followed by the Coast Guard and larger primary response contractors.

FISHING VESSELS AND TRIBAL INPUT

The Department of Ecology’s budget cuts have left shortcomings in cleanup equipment quality and capacity to store oil from spills, said Chad Bowechop, manager of the [Makah Tribal Council’s Office of Marine Affairs](#). He said the tribe is deeply concerned about the increase in tanker traffic that passes tribal lands, which are located on the Strait of Juan de Fuca – the watery freeway for oil transport in the region.

He wants to see tribal knowledge tapped for spill preparation and response.

“Our feeling is nobody knows our treaty area, our waters better than our own fishermen and that’s why we’ve been working so hard to advocate the development of a tribal ‘vessel of opportunity’ program,” he said.

“Vessel of opportunity” programs enlist local fishing vessels and other commercial boats to help with an oil spill cleanup. During the 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, hundreds of fishing vessels were hired to put out boom, skim oil and collect tar balls. The vessels are used in addition to Primary Response Contractors.

Although the Department of Ecology has such a program, it recently concluded in a post-BP Deepwater Horizon report the state needed to do more to take advantage of those resources by making sure they are trained and included in oils spill drills.

Bowe chop said the Makah tribe has worked with some clean up contracting companies on spill drills off the Olympic coast, he said there are more opportunities for tribes, response contractors and government to collaborate.

“If we don’t work together as partners, then the job is too big for any one of us to do by ourselves,” Bowe chop said.

A COLUMBIA RIVER DRILL

Ships doing business on the Columbia River are subject to the same requirements as those that travel through Puget Sound or along the coast. They have to have oil spill response plans on file with [Washington’s Department of Ecology](#) or with the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

No crude oil is transported on the Columbia, but tankers and tank barges carry millions of gallons of diesel fuel and bunker fuel up and down the river.

When someone reports an oil spill on the Columbia River, the [Clean Rivers Cooperative](#) and the [Marine Spill Response Corporation](#) are among the Primary Response Contractors shipping companies pay to clean up the mess. Like their counterparts in the Puget Sound, the contractors must complete spill drills.

About 40 people from the two response groups rehearsed a few weeks again, setting up a command center at the Elochoman Slough Marina in Cathlamet, Wash., about 10 miles from the mouth of the Columbia.

Ernie Quesada, the general manager of Clean Rivers, oversaw the drill, walking everyone through their roles before they boarded their boats.

On the water, the 229-foot *Oregon Responder* placed a circle of large, black boom on the river. Once the imaginary oil was contained, the crew lowered an orange skimmer into the circle to suck up the spill.

GET INVOLVED

Beginning in January, the Washington Department of Ecology will be revising oil spill readiness rules. To follow the progress or participate in the process, visit the department’s [website](#).

Down river, teams of small boats stretched yellow boom, linked like sausages, across the entrance of a side channel and along the shore.

“What these guys did over here, they laid the boom up on the shore to have a better seal from the shore to the water so there’re no gaps,” Quesada explained.

The crew ran out of boom, but they loaded more boom from another boat and finished the task. That’s a detail that could be part of a report listing areas the companies need to improve. The equipment deployment drills are more about gaining experience and making plan and deployment improvements than penalties for shortcomings.

NEAR THE MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

On October 11, the same day that the *Oregon Responder* and other boats were practicing for a spill on the Columbia River, the Washington Department of Ecology and the U.S. Coast Guard were responding to a disabled vessel at the mouth of the river, about nine miles west of Cape Disappointment.

The Egyptian-flagged, 728-foot bulk carrier, *The Edfu*, had lost propulsion power and had only one anchor to keep it from drifting to shore. A Coast Guard helicopter assessed the scene, and the Coast Guard ordered the ship to have two tug boats at its sides. Two days later, the ship regained its power and was escorted across the Columbia River bar to the Port of Astoria. There, Coast Guard inspectors found numerous deficiencies, including defective firefighting equipment, which according to the Coast Guard’s report, “prevented the ship’s crew from being able to respond to a fire aboard the ship.”

In this case, no oil was spilled, but had the anchor given way before the tug boats arrived, the situation could have become serious because bulk carriers like *The Edfu* carry millions of gallons of bunker fuel.

The two leading causes of oil spills from vessels are equipment failure and human error, according to a [2011 study](#) from the Pacific States-British Columbia Oil Spill Task Force.

“We are under no illusions that a major spill could not happen. It could,” said Ecology’s Hart. “Could we be better prepared? Yes.”

This report is the first in an occasional series on oil in the Pacific Northwest.