NORTHWEST AREA CONTINGENCY PLAN
REGION TEN REGIONAL CONTINGENCY PLAN

Overview

The Region Ten Regional Response Team (RRT) and the Northwest Area Committee (NWAC) in cooperation have developed an unprecedented contingency plan covering three states, and more than 60 rivers and canals. This effort has resulted in a plan that combines federal, state, and local agencies; tribal governments; and nonprofit organizations to protect the Region's valuable resources. The following are a few of the important features of the Northwest Area Contingency Plan (NWACP) / Regional Contingency Plan:

- Merging U.S. Coast Guard and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) planning responsibilities;
- Merging RRT and NWAC planning responsibilities;
- Details environmental and economic characteristics through Geographic response plans (GRPs);
- Federal, state, and local government, Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPCs), and tribal governments combining resources for effective response; and
- World Wide Web site posting of committee activities and plans.

Background

The NWACP is designed to protect the people, wildlife, and natural resources in the states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho from the environmental hazards of accidental oil and chemical releases. The NWACP area of responsibility covers the outer coasts of Oregon & Washington; the Strait of Juan de Fuca and Puget Sound; approximately 60 rivers and canals in Washington and Oregon, (including the Columbia, Williamette, and Snake Rivers); and the inland areas of Oregon, Washington and Idaho. The plan contains specific response policy statements and incident management guidelines and tools. A series of GRPs, developed for geographically specific locations throughout this large area of responsibility, were created to identify specific environmental and historical areas of concern and identify strategies which would protect them. The plan, combined with the GRPs, addresses unified incident command; in-situ burn, dispersant and decanting policies and pre-approval checklists; endangered species and historical preservation identification and protection; and pre-identified response strategies for the first 24 hours of a response.

The NWAC and the RRT promote complete cooperation between federal, state, and local agencies, LEPCs, responsible parties, and industry during the plan revision and updating process. The NWACP and GRPs are updated annually to ensure all information is current.

Coordinated Planning Activities

The NWAC/RRT official membership is drawn from 16 federal and state agencies, each retaining jurisdiction and legal authority for its area. Committee members include co-chairs from the Coast Guard Marine Safety Offices in Portland and Puget Sound, and the EPA. Serving as co-vice chairs are the Washington State Department of Ecology, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, and the Idaho State Bureau of Hazardous Materials. The NWACP was developed by these agencies, in conjunction with other government agencies, response contractors, and interested parties.

The NWAC and the RRT meet as a group and separately to address spill preparedness and response issues. Meetings occur at least semi-annually. Both seek advice, information, and expertise from appropriate sources in the area and establish joint workgroups to discuss and solve specific problems.

Northwest Area Committee Profile

RRT Members:

- EPA Region Ten
- USCG District Thirteen
- Dept. of Agriculture (US Forest Service)
- Dept. of Commerce (NOAA)
- Dept. of Defense (Army, Navy, Air Force)
- Dept. of Justice
- Dept. of Labor (OSHA)
- Federal Emergency Management Agency
- Dept. of Health & Human Services
- Dept. of Interior
- Food & Drug Administration
- General Services Administration
- Federal Highway Administration

Both NWAC & RRT Members:

- USCG MSO Puget Sound
- USCG MSO Portland
- Washington Dept. of Ecology
- Oregon Dept. of Environmental Quality
- Idaho State Bureau of Hazardous Materials

Native Population. The Northwest Area is home to 39 federally recognized Native American Tribes. Each tribe has its own governmental responsibility on its reservation. Many of these tribes also have rights to use land and water outside of their reservations. The tribes partner in planning, and some tribes help develop the geographic response plans.

Workgroups. These workgroups consist of representatives from industry, environmental groups, or other interested parties. The following workgroups were developed to address specific issues:

a) Equipment and Resources: Assembles information about response equipment owned by public and private entities in the Area and retains that information in a database. The workgroup developed the Equipment Resources Section of the plan.

b) Incident Command System (ICS): Reviewed traditional incident command system structures in light of unified command principles and determined modifications appropriate to oil and hazardous materials responses; made recommendations on ICS use; established criteria for determining suitability of command posts, reviewed potential sites, and developed the ICS material in the plan.

c) Joint Information Center: Provides a forum for the spill response community to discuss issues relating to public affairs and press coverage in advance of a response. Among the issues the Workgroup addresses are use of a Joint Information Center (JIC), review and approval of press releases, and coordination of contacts with the press and electronic media.

d) In Situ Burning: Analyzes the information available about the health and environmental effects of in-situ burning and evaluates the risks and tradeoffs.

e) Communications: Conducts surveys of communications capabilities and equipment in the area; identifies gaps in radio and telephone coverage, coordinates frequency management and allocation, and addresses other technical issues such as how to communicate across different frequencies during a response; and develops interagency agreements and memoranda of understanding on communications-related issues.

f) Exercise Evaluation and Scheduling: Encourages consistency among agency exercise evaluation programs; develops and distributes a calendar where agencies, facilities, and vessels can announce planned drills and exercises; and determines how information gathered from exercises and evaluations of actual responses can be used to update existing GRP and ACP information.

g) Hazardous Materials: Evaluates responses to hazardous substance releases and makes recommendations for inclusion in the plan.

h) Geographic Response Plans: Coordinates the production, maintenance and format of geographic response plans for Oregon, Washington and Idaho; monitors similarity among GRPs to ensure rapid implementation (first 24 hour response strategies) in the event of an oil spill in specific geographic locations; considers the issues regarding National Historic Preservation and Endangered Species; and provides documentation and procedures to protect ecological and cultural resources integrity for the benefit of current and future generations.

i) Marine Firefighting: Establishes a process for addressing marine fire fighting concerns by representatives from the U.S. Coast Guard, Washington State Department of Ecology, local fire departments, and other interested agencies; explores issues of funding, training, liability, MOA's between agencies, and other pertinent issues.

j) Shoreline Countermeasures: Assess the need for shoreline cleanup; selects the most appropriate cleanup method; determines priorities for shoreline cleanup; documents the spatial oil distribution over time; and maintains internally consistent historical records of shoreline oil distribution.

Geographic Response Plans. GRPs represent areas within the Region with similar geographic and environmental features. These plans consist of geographic area descriptions, and include environmental information, response resources, charts, specific response plans, and other pertinent local information. These plans serve as the working documents for the main plan by providing recommended response strategies. Endangered Species and National Historic Preservation issues are taken into consideration as the plans are developed.

Northwest Area Committee Activities

- Meets semi-annually
- Facilitates member coordination
- Organizes workgroups to address particular problems or subjects
- Oversees and revises the NWACP Steering Committee
- Formats and produces GRPs
- Plans training and community outreach

Partnering. The NWACP is designed to facilitate the coordination of federal, state, and local governments, potential responsible parties, response personnel, and the community to ensure an effective response to a hazardous chemical or oil spill release. The plan provides guidance and defines the roles of all involved parties. The NWACP is consistent with the National Oil and Hazardous Substance Contingency Plan. The plan also addresses the issues of international cooperation with British Columbia and the Canadian Government for incidents occurring in adjoining waters.

Training & Exercises

Exercises. Federal and state signatory agencies have agreed to adopt an exercise policy consistent with the Preparedness for Response Exercise Program (PREP). Larger exercises must be scheduled through the National Strike Force Coordination Center (NSFCC), while smaller exercises are placed on the Northwest Area Committee PREP Exercise schedule on a voluntary basis.

Training. Safety is a priority for the NWAC. Regardless of the hazard levels, all personnel (including volunteers) receive both classroom and on-site training. On-site training gives personnel hands-on experience and detailed safety information, as well as clarifying job descriptions.

Public Relations. The NWAC has developed guidelines for media and community relations, and has prepared sample press releases and news advisories. The NWACP Joint Information Center created by NWAC/RRT members and private sector volunteers provides a strong professional organization and workforce to assist the On-Scene Coordinator (OSC) as needed.

Spill Scenarios. The NWACP includes scenarios for three levels of response for each subarea covered by the plan, and one worst case scenario for the inland zone (EPA). The scenarios are partially based on prior events. Each scenario discusses the situation, key assumptions, initial action, response organizations, strategies (where developed), resources and shortfalls, disposal options, and clean-up efforts. The following is one example of a worst-case discharge as presented on the NWACP Internet home page.

Hypothetical Incident Scenario. The scenario states that in March, an inbound tanker vessel grounds at Buckeye Shoal in Rosario Straits of Puget Sound, suffering severe structural damage. Due to extreme damage, the vessel sinks within five hours, releasing 35 million gallons of Alaskan North Slope crude oil. The oil puts most of Northern Puget Sound, Straits of Juan de Fuca, and Vancouver Island at risk. The weather is bad with heavy rain and limited visibility. Key assumptions are that containment and recovery operations will begin within six hours and all skimmers and booms will be on-scene within 72 hours; the weather conditions or equipment used will not affect the operation; and no resources will be available from Canada.

Scenario Analysis. In this scenario, primary recovery efforts are focused on open water recovery by skimming vessels and shoreline countermeasures. The Unified Command immediately evaluates the appropriateness of decanting, using dispersants and/or in-situ burning as response options. Rigging of defensive boom and placement of skimmers in projected impact areas are to be completed within 48 hours. Containment booming must begin immediately. Any discharge not contained is to be channeled to allow a greater opportunity for open water recovery and to minimize beach impacts. The implications of the 1980 International Treaty with Canada are evaluated, as the treaty entitles either country to coordinate clean-up efforts within 30 miles of the international border. Because the magnitude of this situation qualifies it as a Spill of National Significance, additional notifications and coordination are explored.

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