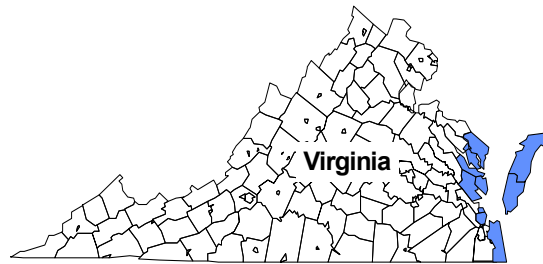


VIRGINIA COASTAL AREA COMMITTEE



Overview

The Virginia Coastal Area Committee (VCAC) is tasked with helping protect not only the Virginia coastline, but one of the country's greatest resources, the Chesapeake Bay. To do this takes the coordination and resources of many organizations and concerned parties. Recognizing this, the VCAC coordinates with the Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPCs) throughout the area. Through joint membership and participation in both LEPC and VCAC activities, federal, state, and local government agencies have increased resource pools, mutual awareness, and response cooperation. The following are some key features of the Virginia Area Committee:

- Emphasis on coordination with LEPCs;
- Adapted Integrated Command System (ICS) to fit local response community practices; and
- Unannounced drills four times a year.

Background

The VCAC's area of responsibility includes all of Virginia's coastal areas and waters between the Maryland and North Carolina State lines. This includes much of the Chesapeake Bay, the largest estuary in the United States. Much of this area is economically dependent upon the commercial fishing and recreational tourism industries. However, due to the thriving industrial and commercial traffic between Norfolk and Baltimore Harbor, the area is at a high risk for accidents.

The VCAC's primary goal is to protect its coastal areas and waters. To accomplish this, the committee depends on its many federal, state, and local government members. Their planning strategy relies on the Federal On-Scene Coordinator (FOSC) and the ICS to respond effectively, while involving the right resources at the right time.

Planning Committee Profile

Virginia Coastal Area Committee consists of:

- Thirty-two federal members from:
U.S. Navy; U.S. Dept. of Commerce
U.S. Army; U.S. Dept. of the Interior;
U.S. Coast Guard; Maritime Administration;
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers;
National Marine Fisheries Service;
National Park Service; others
- Forty-six state and local members from:
Various state agencies;
Local county and city administrators;
Town managers;
Fire departments;
Hazmat coordinators; and
Emergency services
- Thirty-seven local industry members from:
Various local business;
Other locally concerned parties.

Coordinated Planning Activities

The VCAC meets, as a whole, quarterly. The meetings provide a chance for committee members to promote their initiatives to new attendees and to exchange ideas. These meetings help eliminate gaps in knowledge and clarify the resource capabilities of the committee membership. The committee continues its communications outside of meetings by involving key committee members in subcommittee activities, and in almost every pollution incident. This allows the committee to stay abreast of local issues and provides an opportunity to foster cooperative efforts with interested parties not normally associated with the committee. Information is disseminated to members through notices and an extensive phone tree. Public concerns are addressed through a public affairs subcommittee; however, most information is distributed at the quarterly meetings. The FOSC acts as the chair of the VCAC for each of the quarterly meetings. All committee members are strongly encouraged to participate in each quarterly meeting and in the activities of the standing subcommittees.

Planning. For the VCAC, successful planning begins with frequent meetings and communications, and well-defined exercise responsibilities. The VCAC attempts to make these responsibilities routine for the members (responders) by assigning members to one of the four cells of ICS activities: Planning, Operations, Logistics, and Finance. The VCAC plan also uses a command staff inserted above the four cells. This staff coordinates planning activities, ensures that each cell carries out its planning responsibilities, and monitors the planning progress in the cells. During any incident, responders will know exactly how to participate to make an efficient and successful response.

The VCAC strategic plan provides guidance by establishing general goals and objectives. These goals are matched with local emergency plans and LEPC guidelines. Each member is assigned specific goals, objectives, and responsibilities. Should an incident occur, the plan structure allows all members to know their exact responsibilities and points of contact. Contact procedures cover not only who's called in an emergency, but also how to disseminate the information to public interests (e.g., the Governor's Representative in Richmond). This ensures that all interested parties are involved and represented during an incident.

Outreach. The VCAC actively recruits other local planning agencies using brochures detailing its goals, objectives, and strategy. In addition, these brochures help promote local planning, and serve as an additional method of ensuring that the committee will have the proper resources to respond to an incident. The MSO also visits local schools, participates in "Clean the Bay Day", and Harbor Fests, and displays its mobile field command post. These efforts educate the public, relieve misconceptions about needing response plans, and help recruit smaller counties to participate.

Planning Committee Activities

- VCAC meets quarterly
- Plan updated yearly
- U.S. Coast Guard responsible for the revision and distribution of the plan
- Information disseminated through newsletters and meetings
- Unannounced drills conducted four times a year

Training & Exercises

The VCAC conducts one tabletop exercise annually. In addition, the MSO conducts unannounced (government-initiated exercise) drills on vessels and other facilities at least four times a year. Among other things, these drills ensure, for example, that facility response plans are adequate and telephone numbers of contractors and coordinators are current.

Incident and Lessons Learned

Incident. The container ship M/V ALMERIA LYKES was inbound from Germany to Norfolk on January 11, 1997. When a ship's officer detected a strong odor emanating from a cargo hold, the U.S. Coast Guard was notified. The FOSC called in the Atlantic Strike Team (AST) for support and the Unified Command System was activated. Before the vessel arrived, the U.S. Coast Guard Marine Safety Office (MSO) prepared a "work-up" of all the potential dangers associated with each hazardous chemical onboard. A marine chemist and MSO Hampton Roads personnel went aboard before the vessel was allowed to dock. The vessel steamed in circles at a slow bell for two hours while the chemist conducted initial sampling. Based on the results, the FOSC granted permission for the vessel to proceed to Norfolk to begin off-loading cargo and undergo additional testing.

Response. An Incident Action Plan and Site Safety Plan were developed for this response. Once docked, the cargo hatch was lifted and additional tests conducted. No hazards were detected, and the vessel was granted permission to off-load its extra containers to get to the containers holding the suspected source of the odor. An MSO Hampton Roads response team remained with the vessel throughout the operation to ensure that all steps agreed upon by the FOSC and responsible party were followed. As the containers were off-loaded, they were examined for damage or leaks. Based on odor and signs of leakage, one general cargo (non-hazardous) container was identified as the source of the smell. The vessel was then permitted to stand down the response.

Lessons Learned. The ALMERIA LYKES incident provides a great example of the VCAC planning efforts. Once the container ship made initial contact, all potential resources were contacted and made available. Outside resources were available to assist, and the team drafted incident-specific plans. All parties communicated and acted to resolve what could have been a dangerous incident. Overall, the response was considered a great success.

Point of Contact



LCDR E. Washburn
(757) 441-3453
MSO Hampton Roads
Norfolk Federal Building
200 Granby Street
Norfolk, VA 23510