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44 oil spills found in southeast Louisiana

Largest is nearly 4 million gallons, most big ones are on Mississippi River

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By **Miguel Llanos**

Reporter

MSNBC

Updated: 2:56 p.m. ET Sept. 16, 2005

More than 500 specialists are working to clean up 44 oil spills ranging from several hundred gallons to nearly 4 million gallons, the U.S. Coast Guard said in an assessment that goes far beyond initial reports of just two significant spills.



Miguel Llanos
Reporter

The report comes nearly three weeks after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, and reflects the fact that the Coast Guard and other agencies are able to only now tackle environmental problems since the search and rescue effort is winding down.

The Coast Guard estimates more than 7 million gallons of oil were spilled from industrial plants, storage depots and other facilities around southeast Louisiana.

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That is about two-thirds as much oil as spilled from the Exxon Valdez tanker in 1989. But unlike the oil from the Valdez, which poured from a single source, these oil spills are scattered at sites throughout southeast Louisiana.

The oil could threaten the region's fragile coastal marshes, but three-quarters of it was not posing a danger to wetlands, the Coast Guard said, noting that more than 1.3 million gallons had evaporated or dispersed.

Crews had recovered nearly 2 million gallons and had contained another 2.3 million gallons behind booms and other barriers, the Coast Guard said.

But the state Department of Environmental Quality emphasized that the numbers are only estimates and that it's too early to tell how effective the cleanup is.

"Those are just estimates as is everything at this point," department spokeswoman Jean Kelly told MSNBC.com on Friday. "You don't know where it all went."

To suggest that the vast majority of the oil has been cleaned up "is ludicrous if you've seen the coast," she added.

Activists 'very concerned'

The nonprofit Louisiana Environmental Action Network said it remains concerned given how late the cleanup began and what's known so far.

"We're very concerned," executive director Marylee Orr told MSNBC.com. "We're watching the limited data that has come out."

Of particular concern is a spill in Meraux, a town just outside New Orleans on the Mississippi River, where oil mixed with floodwaters and sediment to submerge hundreds of homes.

Murphy Oil, which owns the refinery where the spill occurred, said Friday that two class action lawsuits were filed in federal court against the company seeking damages for residents.

The company said the lawsuits, filed in the U.S. Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana, are seeking damages for residents of St. Bernard Parish in southeast Louisiana, parts of which were covered in oil and sludge after the spill.

Orr said people calling to report problems have been urged to document them until remediation begins.

The combination of sewage, chemicals, oil and other pollutants is an environmental disaster of "epic proportions," Orr said.

No one knows what that "toxic gumbo does to the human body when its exposed at the same time."

In the case of oil spills, the state's Department of Environmental Quality had reported just two significant cases, the one in Mereaux and another in Venice.

Below are the largest known spills, most of them along the Mississippi River south of New Orleans, along with estimates provided by the Coast Guard.

Major spills (over 100,000 gallons)

Bass Enterprises Production Company (Cox Bay): About 3.78 million gallons discharged, of which 960,000 gallons were recovered, 2 million gallons were contained and 982,000 gallons evaporated.

Shell (Pilot Town): About 1.05 million gallons discharged, of which about 718,000 gallons were recovered, 129,000 were contained and 105,000 gallons evaporated or dispersed. Some 87,000 gallons have not been contained.

Chevron (Empire): About 991,000 gallons were released, of which 983,000 gallons were naturally dispersed or evaporated, 4,000 gallons were recovered and 3,600 gallons were contained.

Murphy Oil Corporation (Meraux): About 819,000 gallons discharged, of which 305,000 were recovered, 196,000 gallons were contained and 312,000 gallons evaporated. Some 6,000 gallons were not recovered.

Bass Enterprises (Point a la Hache): About 461,000 gallons of oil discharged, of which half was contained and half evaporated.

Medium spills (10,000 to 100,000 gallons)

Chevron (Port Fourchon): About 53,000 gallons were released, of which 21,000 gallons were naturally dispersed, 26,000 gallons were recovered and 420 gallons were contained.

Venice Energy Services Company (Venice): About 840,000 gallons of potential discharge are enclosed in bermed and boomed area, but only 25,000 gallons were actually discharged, of which 4,800 gallons were recovered.

Shell Pipeline Oil (Nairn): About 13,440 gallons discharged, of which 126 gallons were recovered, 2,940 gallons were contained and 10,500 gallons reached shoreline.

Sundown Energy (West Potash): About 13,000 gallons discharged, of which 153 gallons were recovered, 2,000 gallons were contained, and 5,000 gallons reached shoreline.

The Associated Press and Reuters contributed to this report.

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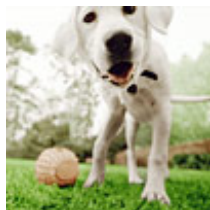
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