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## Preparing for the worst: Spill responders practice on Kachemak Bay

By Hal Spence | Peninsula Clarion

Response vessels and cleanup equipment spread out across parts of Kachemak Bay on Thursday practicing to mitigate an oil spill no one wants to see happen, but which everyone accepts as probably inevitable.

"We have tremendous capabilities post OPA 90 with resources for oil spill response in this part of Alaska," said Adm. Gene Brooks, commander of the 17th Coast Guard District, on hand to observe the spill drill. Brooks was referring to the federal Oil Pollution Act of 1990. "That's because a lot of people have worked very hard for the last 20 years to ensure that an Exxon Valdez doesn't happen again."

In March of 1989, the Exxon Valdez tanker ran aground in Prince William Sound, spilling an estimated 11 million gallons of North Slope crude, producing an oil slick that spread to Kodiak Island, the Aleutian Chain and into Kachemak Bay and lower Cook Inlet. Its effects are still being felt today.

That event launched agencies such as the Cook Inlet and Prince William Sound regional advisory councils and a continuing effort to prepare for future spills that involves millions of dollars spent on equipment and personnel. It is the meshing of those two elements that necessitates training days like Thursday.

Heading up the drill was the Unified Command, which included Federal On Scene Coordinator Mark Hamilton, Coast Guard captain of the Western Alaska, along with the State On Scene Coordinator Garrey Folley, with the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, and Shawn Brown, the Responsible Party On Scene Coordinator -- in this case, Tesoro.

Out on the bay at anchor was the Tanker Captain H. A. Downing, provided by Tesoro for the drill. The drill scenario had the Downing colliding with a smaller vessel off Gore Point while en route from Valdez to the KPL Dock at Nikiski. Gore Point is on the Kenai Peninsula's southern coast just west of Kenai Fjords National Park.

For practicing such things as deploying boom, operating skimmers, bow collectors, mini-barges, testing new technologies and training crews -- many of them aboard the volunteer fleet of fishing boats prepared to respond spills, Thursday's conditions were ideal. The water was flat calm and there was no wind. Unfortunately, those conditions are almost never mimicked off Gore Point.

"I can tell you that when this actually happens, the weather is really bad, it's a lot darker, a lot colder and a lot harder," Adm. Brooks commented later. "It's easier to learn how to do this now in a beautiful place like Homer than to learn how to do it on scene in an actual event."

Drills on the bay involved deepwater oil recovery efforts as well as protective measures meant to prevent oil from reaching sensitive habitats near shore. Some 120 such sites have already been identified in the Cook Inlet region and would get special attention were a real spill to threaten them.

Among the assets at work around the Downing were Barge 141 and the tug Vigilant, part of

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retinue of equipment owned by or contracted to Cook Inlet Spill Response and Prevention Inc., or CISPRI. Scores of observers aboard the Rainbow Connection, a tour boat out of Homer Harbor, watched as the Vigilant impressively muscled the barge along side the Downing, just as it would were it necessary to pump oil from a stricken tanker to holds aboard the barge.

Elsewhere, various types of boom were deployed and demonstrated, along with brand new technology for measuring the effectiveness of dispersants should they be needed.

Also using Kachemak Bay as the site of spill practice were boats and equipment used by the Alyeska Pipeline Service Company's Ship Escort/Response Vessel System.

In the Gore Point spill drill, the incident command team makes a decision relatively quickly to use dispersants to combat the 16,000 barrels of oil blackening the sea. That decision was made, officials said, after consultation with various agencies and representatives of local communities.

Using dispersants is a controversial matter. It does not remove oil from the water, but breaks it up like grease in detergent and distributes it deeper into the water column. Some critics have called the procedure a way to put the oil out of sight and out of mind.

During a discussion the Islands and Oceans Visitors Center in Homer following the drill, Homer Mayor Jim Hornaday said he wasn't convinced that that decision was the correct one.

Folley said using mechanical recovery was always preferable, but that in this case, there simply wasn't time.

"We couldn't get mechanical recovery equipment on scene until 10 hours ... after daylight," he said following the drill. He said dispersants became the only option to protect seabirds and nearby intertidal areas.

"The other option was to do nothing, and that was not an option," he said. "Attacking the spill before it hits the beach was the way to go."

"Often you have to make decisions quickly," Brooks said in an interview during the drill. "You don't have a week or two to consider what to do. If the spill is far offshore and the drift models say you have a day or two or three, then you can take more time."

Dispersed oil, he said, doesn't have the negative impact un-dispersed oil has, and thus is a preferred response if mechanical cleanup is unavailable.

"It's not wonderful," Brooks acknowledged. "But you're dealing with what's better than bad."

How much better? That's a good question.

In a 56-page letter sent the day after the spill drill, apparently coincidentally, the Department of the Interior informed the Alaska Coast Guard and Alaska Regional Response Team members that as of Saturday, Interior no longer approves of the preauthorization of the use of dispersants in Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet, the only two areas in the state where their use is preauthorized.

Technically, the Gore Point mock spill was outside either of those areas, but close to Cook Inlet.

According to the Interior Department, to obtain authorization for use of dispersants anywhere in Alaska from now on will require federal on scene coordinators to follow the "concurrence and consultation" process in the "National Oil and Hazardous Substance Pollution Contingency Plan," also called the NCP.

With respect to dispersants, measuring their effectiveness has recently taken a giant step forward, according to Brian Parscal, who works for the Clean Islands Council in Hawaii. They've been using 1990s technology to measure fluorescence, considered extremely accurate but also very complicated.

"It is not what you would call a rapid response piece of equipment," he noted. "But it was the only game in town."

A new device literally only months old called the Cyclops 7 -- a cigar-sized device housed inside a small cylinder that is suspended in the water column -- provides a measure of

fluorescence and can determine if dispersants are producing the desired effect. It doesn't have to be calibrated and is very easy to use, Parscal said.

"I'm confident that this is the next generation of SMART (Special Monitoring of Applied Response Technologies) protocol," he said.

Janice Page, a representative with a company called Entrix Inc., demonstrated a new hand-held device she said would make shoreline cleanup assessment much more precise.

"It fits in the pocket. It's a take-it-anywhere system," she said.

Essentially, the device allows its user to enter data about an area of shoreline into a standardized form that can then be uploaded to computers for analyzing spill impacts and deciding how best to remove oil.

Doug Lentsch, general manager of CISPRI, said his organization holds regular spill drills of one size or another to ensure the agency and its corps of volunteers in the fishing industry remain prepared to attack the next real spill.

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