

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A large oil spill generates strong negative emotions. The spiller is shocked and embarrassed that the accident occurred. Elected officials and government agencies at all levels respond to public outrage; the media are mobilized quickly; and angry citizens step before microphones denouncing the spiller and call for immediate action. Spill managers, cleanup contractors, scientists, and other spill “experts” are questioned by the media about response details, and spill impacts and how long they will last. When it is all over, how successful was the response effort? Each entity may have a different perspective based on its way of assessing performance. This paper explores the roles of various participants and interested observers in a spill response and the criteria by which they judge it.

A review of the history of judging spill response performance documents an early default criterion in the 1970s — remove visible oil — that evolved toward ecologically based criteria in the 1980s — minimize spill impacts and protect environmentally sensitive areas. After the *Exxon Valdez* spill, more stakeholders as well as different criteria for judgment entered the spill response process in the 1990s. This spill had legislative and regulatory effects far beyond the US. In addition, legal issues now may affect the conduct of the response itself and the judgments that follow.

Participants in the response, interest groups, others affected by the spill, and the media are primary judges of spill response performance. Secondary judges are the public. Almost all observers seem to agree that, at present, the media are the closest to final judges of spill response performance. All response participants fear negative media coverage and crave positive coverage.

In addition to the media, other judges include the spiller’s company; scientists in universities, consulting firms, government agencies, and oil companies; government and oil company spill managers; regulatory and trustee agencies; environmental and other citizens groups; elected officials; property owners and business community; and the fishing industry. Criteria important to each in judging spill response performance are many and often conflicting.

Much national and local legislation and an international convention followed the Exxon Valdez incident. Some effects are positive and contribute to improved response performance: strengthened contingency plans and training, more available response equipment, and effective use of research results on all aspects of oil spills. Other factors impede performance: broad-based decision-making systems (involving many juris-

dictions that must be satisfied), public outrage, and environmental and other citizens groups with additional demands, as well as polarization among a spiller, regulatory agencies, and citizens groups. The recommended solution to promote performance improvement is to incorporate teamwork and streamlined management, involve spill experts in decision making, and improve communications.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The spill response system has become adversarial in some areas of the world. Trust and teamwork are difficult to find in more areas. Currently, the possibility of a response being judged completely successful is remote. Recommendations are offered to move toward a more evaluative system based on teamwork and guided by goals and performance criteria that have been accepted in advance by all stakeholders.

### SPILL MANAGEMENT AND DECISION MAKING

If decisions cannot be reached quickly in a command center, they cannot be implemented quickly in the field. Unless some level of teamwork is achieved, timely decision making and implementation to minimize the spread of oil and protect sensitive resources will not occur. Streamlining management during the emergency phase of a spill by minimizing the number of decision makers and relying heavily on spill experts is recommended. Affected communities’ and environmental and other citizens groups’ concerns must be factored into these deliberations, but decisions should be made as quickly as possible by those most knowledgeable of spill response — that is, spill scientists, operations specialists, and response professionals — especially during the emergency phases of a spill.

### USE OF STAKEHOLDERS TO ESTABLISH PLANNING AND RESPONSE CRITERIA

Each stakeholder has performance criteria. By engaging stakeholders prior to an incident, consensus can be sought, compromises attempted, and criteria adjusted to resolve any conflicts before a crisis arises. Response priorities, strategies, and tactics can be modified based on stakeholder input. Involving stakeholders in the initial stages of contingency planning can greatly improve the ability of a response organization to meet stakeholders’ goals.

**USE OF A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO MEASURE PERFORMANCE**

The use of a systematic, response performance measurement process is recommended. Such a process encourages stakeholder participation in establishing specific performance criteria for spill response. These criteria form reference points from which goals and strategies are developed in contingency plans. Development of specific, measurable, achievable, result-oriented goals enables a response organization to better manage spill response and measure improvement. Additionally, goals enable a response organization and stakeholders to track performance during exercises and response and adjust performance criteria and strategies in contingency plans. During planning and after most spills, a response organization and stakeholders should conduct this process continuously.

It should result in improved relations and increased response preparation.

A third-party panel also can evaluate spill response performance. This panel could be appointed following a major spill incident to study decisions made, reasons for them, and their impact and effectiveness and develop recommendations for the future. The panel could include a variety of disciplines. It is critical, however, that the panel have a framework by which to judge the response — members must be familiar with the goals, objectives, strategies, and constraints that guided response decision making in the first place.