Regional Response Team/Northwest Area Committee

Marine Oil Spill Prevention

Introduction

Preventing an oil spill is our best option to protect the environment. Federal, state, and local agencies work with industry to reduce the risk of oil spills.

Vessel and Facility Issues

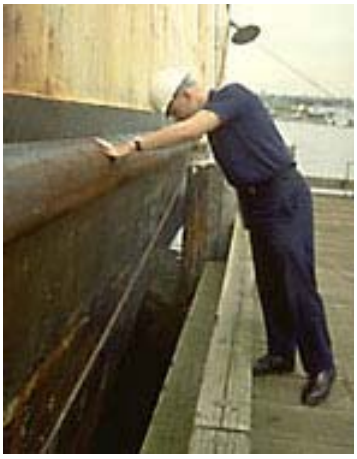
Federal, state, and local agencies regulate oil handling vessels and facilities. They target vessel and facility construction, maintenance, and operations to reduce the threat of oil spills and other undesirable incidents. National procedural and mechanical requirements set safety standards on vessels and at oil handling facilities. U.S. flagged vessels must pass regular inspections to keep the documents necessary to sail. However, more than 90% of commercial port calls in U.S. waters are by vessels flying foreign flags. To minimize the threat posed by foreign ships, the USCG conducts boardings to ensure compliance with international standards and applicable U.S. regulations. Foreign vessels are boarded based on a risk ranking derived from several factors such as: where the ship is from, classification society, owner, and vessel history. The Oil Pollution Act of 1990 (OPA 90) required design changes for tank ships and tank barges to reduce the threat and volume of oil spills. Today, newly constructed oil cargo vessels are built with double hulls, which provides a void space to eliminate or reduce spillage if an accident occurs. OPA 90 required existing tank vessels to be retrofitted or removed from service in U.S. waters over a 25-year period. Land-based facilities can also be a source of oil spills. Like vessels, land-based facilities are subject to regulation and periodic inspection by federal, state, and local agencies. Secondary containment is required at land-based facility oil tanks to prevent the spread of oil if a leak occurs.

Prevention Through People

In 1996, the USCG implemented a new strategic over-arching prevention program, Prevention Through People (PTP). Research found that most spills and serious accidents were caused by human error. The PTP program emphasizes the role of people in preventing casualties and pollution.

On-going Safety Initiatives

International efforts with Port State Control (the efforts of nations to reduce risks from foreign vessels) have enhanced the safety of deep draft vessels, including oil tankers. The USCG does not allow ships into U.S. ports if they fail to meet certification standards.



A Coast Guard inspector checks ships and docks around Puget Sound for oil and fuel leakage into the water. Photo: USCG

Enforcement and Liability

Penalties from the enforcement of federal and state laws provide another incentive for the maritime community to comply with regulated standards, as sanctions range from letters of warning to criminal prosecution. Similarly, expanded liabilities under OPA 90 are another important factor in leveraging change in the maritime industry and influencing the degree to which affected companies emphasize safety and prevention.

Investigation and Continuous Improvement

Even with the most effective prevention measures in place, accidents will occur. Investigations take place after a spill occurs to find the cause and identify ways to prevent future accidents. Investigations may take several paths including legislative action, public involvement to encourage risk reduction, and regulatory changes.

Spill Planning and Preparedness

Facilities and vessels are required to plan for and conduct response actions if an accident occurs. Trained employees can use the plans and drills to their advantage to help minimize damages in the event of a spill.