Oil Spill Response

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Sensitive Lands Response

Fort Massachusetts on Ship Island, Gulf Islands National Seashore (NPS/Cherie Barth)

What is the immediate response to affected sensitive federal lands?

National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staffs are working within the Unified Command to ensure protection of sensitive resources along the Gulf of Mexico coast in light of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. These agencies have been an integral part of the unified national response and continue to work with the U.S. Coast Guard, BP, and state and federal agencies to assess oil impacts and protect critical natural and cultural resources, wildlife, birds, and historic structures, as well as serve the visiting public.

Shared goals of the Department of the Interior (DOI) agencies in the unified response include protection of sensitive resources, distribution of accurate information for visitors regarding safe recreation, recovery of wildlife, and safety of all personnel and visitors. The Fish and Wildlife Service has taken a leadership role in evaluating the impact of oil on migratory birds and refuge lands and closely monitoring the spread of oil. The Department of the Interior, along with other responding agencies, is working to minimize potential impacts to federally listed species and the habitats upon which they depend.

What sensitive lands and resources are impacted?

Ten national park units and 36 national wildlife refuges are threatened by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. National parks and refuges in the Gulf area are home to many sensitive animals, habitats, and cultural resources. Seagrass beds are important nursery habitat for sea turtles, young fish, and crustaceans, providing an important food source for manatees. Salt marshes provide a buffer that protects the mainland during storm events and offers foraging sites for a wide variety of birds. Mangroves provide a buffer between the sea and the mainland, as well as providing wildlife habitat. Shipwrecks, archeological sites, Civil War defenses, historic structures, and other cultural resources tell the stories of past inhabitants. These nationally significant resources may be threatened by damage from oil and clean-up operations.

National wildlife refuges are home to dozens of threatened and endangered species, including West Indian manatees, whooping cranes, Mississippi sandhill cranes, wood storks, and four species of sea turtles. The refuges serve as crucial stopovers for migratory songbirds, providing nesting habitat.

Oil can affect species in different ways. Brown pelicans are likely to be exposed to oil as they

float on the water's surface. Loggerhead and leatherback turtles could be impacted as they swim to shore for nesting activities. Scavengers such as bald eagles, gulls, raccoons, and skunks are exposed to oil by feeding on carcasses of contaminated fish and wildlife.

What are some characteristics of good science decisions?

Achieving recovery goals requires a delicate and crucial balance between swift and immediate response and science-based decisions and actions that are intentional and measured. We are able to learn from prior experiences by testing hypotheses and modifying them for the future. For example, we learned from steam-cleaning oiled rocky coasts in other spills that the process sterilized the habitat and caused more damage than oil would have if it were left alone to weather in place. Understanding the bio-energetics of sand beaches and knowing that removing all the wrack, the detrital sea grass and algae that accumulate in windrows parallel to the water line, can reduce the system's biodiversity and productivity; its resilience is crucial.

Understanding how ecosystems function allows us not only to respond to the causes of stress but also to treat the symptoms. Scientifically developed ecological knowledge is testable, repeatable, and verifiable, so responses based on such knowledge are more robust and allow a better evaluation of the relative impacts of oil damage and of oil removal and clean-up damage.

What are long-range plans for restoration of sensitive lands?

DOI agencies will continue to work with the Unified Command on response efforts until the cleanup is complete. The National Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Service are also actively involved in determining the magnitude and extent of injury to trustee resources caused by the oil through a Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) process. DOI agencies will seek to recover all damages and associated costs for trust resources relative to the oil spill and will apply the damages recovered to restore the injured resources to their pre-spill conditions. Long-range plans for restoration of sensitive lands will be correlated directly to the injuries experienced by trust resources.

Because injury assessment is an ongoing process and will not be completed for some time, it is still too early in the NRDA process to identify the details of long-term restoration plans. The injury assessment studies will be important for determining the best path forward to restoring the injured resources to pre-spill conditions. The treatments that are most effective and lightest on the land will be documented and accessible as best practices if needed in future situations.

How are clean-up decisions on sensitive lands being made?

DOI agencies have prepared and implemented plans to assess and clean up oil impacts while protecting natural and cultural resources. These plans were developed using comprehensive scientific information about ocean and shoreline communities and the resources they contain. Science and environmental law guide the decisions made about clean-up operations. Commitment to science-based decision making is critical to ensure that the unified response employs measures that protect sensitive natural and cultural resources. This effort contributes to sustainable decisions within a unified strategy and assists in prioritizing responses.

Where can I get more information?

Learn more about the oil spill response at:

www.nps.gov/aboutus/oil-spill-response.htm
www.restorethegulf.gov
www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com
www.fws.gov/home/dhoilspill

Sea turtle nest site, Gulf Islands National Seashore (NPS/ Ginny Reams)