

PROTECTING TRI-COUNTY MARINE RESOURCES THROUGH THE AREA CONTINGENCY PLAN

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In the event of an oil spill in the coastal zone, marine and coastal resources can be at risk. To ensure the protection of human health and safety, environmental, cultural and economic marine resources, comprehensive oil spill contingency planning must be conducted before such an event occurs.

The Oil Pollution Act of 1990 mandated Area Committees, under the direction of the Federal On-Scene Coordinator, to prepare Area Contingency Plans. In California there are six Area Committees. The Area Committees are chaired by an United States Coast Guard Federal On-Scene Coordinator who works with a State On-Scene Coordinator from the California Office of Spill Prevention and Response.

The primary role of the Area Committee is to act as a preparedness and planning body. Members of the Committee are experienced environmental and response representatives from federal, state and local government agencies with input from industry, environmental groups and other interested parties.

The Area Contingency Plan describes the strategy for a coordinated federal, state and local response to a discharge of oil. Response plans for facility and vessels in the planning area must be consistent with the Area Contingency Plan. The Area Contingency Plan is consistent with both the Regional Contingency Plan and National Contingency Plan for Oil and Hazardous Materials.

Oil spill response for the Tri-county areas of San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara and Ventura counties is documented in the Los Angeles/Long Beach Northern Sector Area Contingency Plan. The Tri-county area has a myriad of environmental, economic, historical and cultural resources. This planning area includes the coastal mainland, Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary and Channel Islands National Park. The bulk of the Area Contingency Plan is devoted to identifying these resources and providing the information and strategies necessary for protecting them.

While the protection of human health and safety has the highest priority in oil spill response, for oil spill response

planning purposes, resources are divided into sites of environmental sensitivity and sites of economic significance. Consistent with law, sites of environmental sensitivity have the second highest priority for protection. Protection of sites of economic significance has the third highest priority during an oil spill response.

The Incident Command System (ICS) is the response management system in use nationwide to respond to an oil spill. Through the ICS, a Unified Command Structure is formed, which makes the final response strategy and protection priority decisions. This system allows for a coordinated response effort, which takes into account the federal, state, local, and responsible party concerns and interests when implementing a response strategy.

Environmentally sensitive and economically significant sites in the planning area are identified in the Area Contingency Plan and ranked for protection. A hierarchy was established for ranking environmentally sensitive sites as A, B & C and economically significant sites as D, E & F with the highest priority being A. Each site has been assessed and mapped, with a protection strategy developed for protecting the resources. Sites are visited intermittently by a subcommittee composed of area experts, to validate and update as necessary the information contained in the site assessment and summary, and strategies developed to protect the site.

The information in the Area Contingency Plans has been updated annually since 1991 and has been used repeatedly and successfully during oil spill responses and spill drills by agencies, oil spill response organizations and industry. Lessons learned during actual spills and drills are incorporated into revisions of the Area Contingency Plan as appropriate. Copies of the Area Contingency Plan can be accessed at the United States Coast Guard Pacific Area Website at:

www.uscg.mil/pacarea/pm/index.htm