Australian Government
Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts

Montara well release: preliminary environment and wildlife response strategy for Commonwealth waters.

SITUATION

7 day forecast modelling indicates that oiling may occur on Ashmore Reef/Islands. Modelling indicates that Cartier Island is unlikely to be effected. Beyond forty-eight hours there are significant margins of error in the modelling predictions. First signs of impact were expected to be noticeable from 28 August 2009 however to date, no impact has been reported by on site observers.

This strategy has been developed to deal with a scenario where negative impacts of the well release are noticeable within the Ashmore Reef National Nature Reserve and/or Cartier Island Marine Reserve. Negative impacts could be recorded in a number of ways, but according to current intelligence is at this stage likely to be in the form of tarballs in low quantities but with repeated impacts (at low intensity) over a period of days to weeks. Tarballs have low toxicity and would strand along the high tide mark on the islands.

ENVIRONMENTAL SITUATION

The rig is about 57 and 80 nautical miles from Cartier Island Marine Reserve and Ashmore Reef National Nature Reserve respectively. Cartier contains one unvegetated sand cay and a mature reef flat with two shallow pools immediately to the north-east of the cay. Ashmore contains two extensive lagoons, mobile channelled carbonate sand flats, shifting sand cays, an extensive reef flat and three vegetated islands, East, Middle and West Islands. The two lagoons have four northern entrances and extensive coral growth. The beaches around each of the three islands at Ashmore are coral rubble. Particle size is generally gravel to pebble in size.

Ashmore and Cartier reserves are important staging points for migratory shorebirds and support large breeding populations of seabirds. Seabirds nest at the reserves throughout the year with some species currently nesting. Individuals from these species dive to shallow depths, foraging throughout the region. Flocks of migratory shorebirds gather at Ashmore and Cartier between October and November.

Significant populations of three marine turtle species feed in the region year round. Ashmore provides critical nesting habitat for the Green turtles whose nesting activity occurs throughout the year peaking around January. Ashmore is also well known for its diversity of seasnakes, however numbers of observations have declined significantly over recent years.

ASSETS

Current Assignment – Ashmore Reef lagoon

Australian Customs Vessel

Deleted: 18/09/2009

6 crew available (dependent on operational priorities) for oil spill clean-up
Basic clean-up equipment available

CLEAN-UP STRATEGY

Planning assumptions:

a) ACV will be equipped for basic shoreline clean-up operations.
b) Should additional cleanup resources be required during this period, DEWHA and AMSA will liaise with PTTEP to ensure resources (personnel and equipment) are directed to Ashmore and/or Cartier as soon as possible.

1. Daily survey of beaches on all Ashmore Islands to determine if oiling has occurred in previous 24 hour period.

2. If oiling is identified, report to DEHWA via the DEWHA duty phone on 0419 293 465 and then compile a report to send via email to the DEWHA duty Officer who responds. The incident report should include location, oil distribution and character, a sketch of the area as per the Shoreline Oiling Assessment template plus photos.

3. DEWHA and AMSA Incident Controller to discuss oiling, and provide advice to Customs officer on how/when clean up should commence.

4. Recovery of oiling if situation warrants. Recovery will be via:

    a. Use of rakes to shift oil into rows.
    b. Use of shovels to lift recovered oil into sand bags.
    c. Care should be taken to minimise sediment removal. If percentage recovered oil to sediment is less than 50% advice should be obtained from AMSA and DEWHA before proceeding further.

5. Recovered oil is to be stored on the ACV for return to mainland. AMSA and DEWHA to coordinate disposal on arrival.

6. Care should be taken to minimise transferral of oil from scene to vessels via boots and Clothing. Officers should utilise the personal protective equipment provided by AMSA.

OILED WILDLIFE

If oiled wildlife is found, the following procedures should be followed:

1. Note the time of day, the location the animal was found and the general condition of the animal – how much oil is on it, if movement appears laboured etc.
2. Identify the animal to species level if possible.
3. Take photographs of all affected wildlife and affected surrounds
4. Note how many other individuals of the same species are in the vicinity (flying, swimming, nesting etc).
5. Contact the DEWHA duty phone for advice on how to handle (0419 293 465) – note that wildlife can be dangerous, particularly if distressed, so no attempt to capture the animal should be made until advised.

6. Where possible take samples (feathers or the whole carcass) for evidence collection purposes noting that samples cannot come in contact with any plastics. Instead, wrap the samples in alfoil and then a bag. Samples must then be frozen in a specifically dedicated bio-hazard freezer to maintain their evidence value.
7. Quarantine may also have an interest in relation to diseases that the birds may also be carrying.
8. All samples (evidence) then need to be managed in line using standard operating procedures with utmost caution.
9. DEWHA to liaise with experts and AMSA to provide advice as soon as possible to the onsite officers.
10. Waste management guidelines need to be developed specifically for any dead oiled wildlife that require disposal. These need to be undertaken in consultation with Customs and Quarantine to consider their requirements. If the slick continues to move closer to the Reserves then we are likely to see large numbers of oiled wildlife that will require disposal.

Specific instructions for oiled birds

1. If birds can be caught, put in a box big enough to allow bird to fully rotate (but not necessarily stretch wings) – put 20mm diameter (maximum) holes around the box to allow airflow.
2. Box mustn't go in air conditioning – place on rear deck out of the weather.
3. If birds feet feel cold, place warm water in sealed bottle in the box (to act like a water bottle).
4. Contact DEWHA as soon as possible.

OILED WILDLIFE RESPONSE

Primary care, triage and rehabilitation for oiled wildlife will be required. This process involves capturing the animal, providing basic onsite care, stabilisation and triage. Animals with a high triage priority will require air transfer to the Broome (location to be confirmed) for complete washing and rehabilitation before release.

Experienced wildlife officers are necessary for any collection operations. This activity is beyond the capability and expectations of ACV crews. Consequently, the following steps should only be followed by, or under the supervision, of a trained wildlife response expert:

Basic on site care

The oiled wildlife systems and actions established aboard the Customs vessels at Ashmore Reserve by DEWHA in effect are providing remote stabilisation in its simplest form. These actions can only be implemented by suitably experienced and competent staff and are beyond the ability of Customs crews on site. Ongoing arrangements for on site experienced wildlife personnel support are therefore necessary to achieve stabilisation.

Requires AMSA oiled wildlife response kits:

1. Quick wash – to remove the worst of the oil contamination and prevent further skin/feather damage.
2. Treat infections or physical injuries.
3. Provide temperature control, hydration and nutritional requirements.

Triage Assessment
There is now enough suitable equipment aboard the Australian Customs Vessel stationed at Ashmore to undertake a full oiled wildlife assessment for each animal. The process does however require an experienced level of training and confidence to deliver this assessment.

Animals will be assessed after which the decision to: euthanize (based on the animal's likelihood of survival and where response efforts are best placed); transport to the mainland; or release the animal will be made.

With live oiled birds identified and captured a decision has to made as to whether an experienced wildlife assessor is mobilised on site (e.g. veterinarian with seabird experience) to complete the assessment or if all the birds are to be transported direct to the proposed rehab centre at Broome to full fill this requirement. This will largely be driven by the number of oiled animals identified and collected.

Transport to mainland
Animals assessed as high triage priority will require transportation via air (helicopter or sea plane) to the mainland to minimise the loss of animals during transport.

Mainland response centre
A response centre will be established and made operational to allow for complete washing and rehabilitation prior to the animal's release. Full details are to be confirmed and discussions are underway with WA Department of Environment and Conservation.

POST RESPONSE WILDLIFE RELEASE

1. *Stabilise wildlife from the "Cleaning and Drying" phase*
   This involves providing adequate housing, temperature control, ventilation, fluid therapy, meeting nutritional needs and any other requirements to allow the bird to get over the stress associated with the washing process.

2. *Prepare wildlife for release*
   For all aquatic birds this involves the provision of pools to facilitate the waterproofing process and may take some days. Waterproof management and implementation is a specialised activity and requires specialised support from experienced personnel.

3. *Select wildlife to be released based on protocols*
   Protocols include adequate body weights; good blood values; normal behaviour and waterproof testing (minimum 6 hours for terns, noddys, boobies and most coastal species; true pelagic species will require 24 hour tests).

4. *Release*
   - Arrange for banding/tagging of all wildlife to be released (contact DEWHA for details)
   - Select suitable sites for wildlife release
   - Make arrangements for release of wildlife

- Transport wildlife to release sites

OILED WILDLIFE PREVENTION

Given the low numbers of oiled wildlife known it is not recommended to initiate 'hazing' practices at this stage. Hazing devices emit a range of different high volume sounds in an attempt to keep wildlife away from the area (some units cover up to 150 hectares). The devices are built to have the similar floating properties as the oil so that they remain with the slick. These devices are constructed in the United States, on request, and cost in the vicinity of $10,000 per unit. The number of units required and the associated timeframe are being investigated.

Ongoing regular monitoring of wildlife at the Ashmore and Cartier Reserves will be conducted to determine when wildlife prevention methods are necessary. This information will then potentially act as a trigger to review, reconsider and possibly implement hazing approaches.