



**TESTIMONY OF  
REAR ADMIRAL JAMES WATSON  
DEPUTY UNIFIED AREA COMMANDER**

**ON THE  
DEEPWATER HORIZON FIRE AND MC 252 OIL SPILL**

**BEFORE THE  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES  
MAY 26, 2010**

Good morning Chairman Rahall and distinguished members of the committee. I am grateful for the opportunity to testify before this committee on the subject of the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill currently ongoing in the Gulf of Mexico.

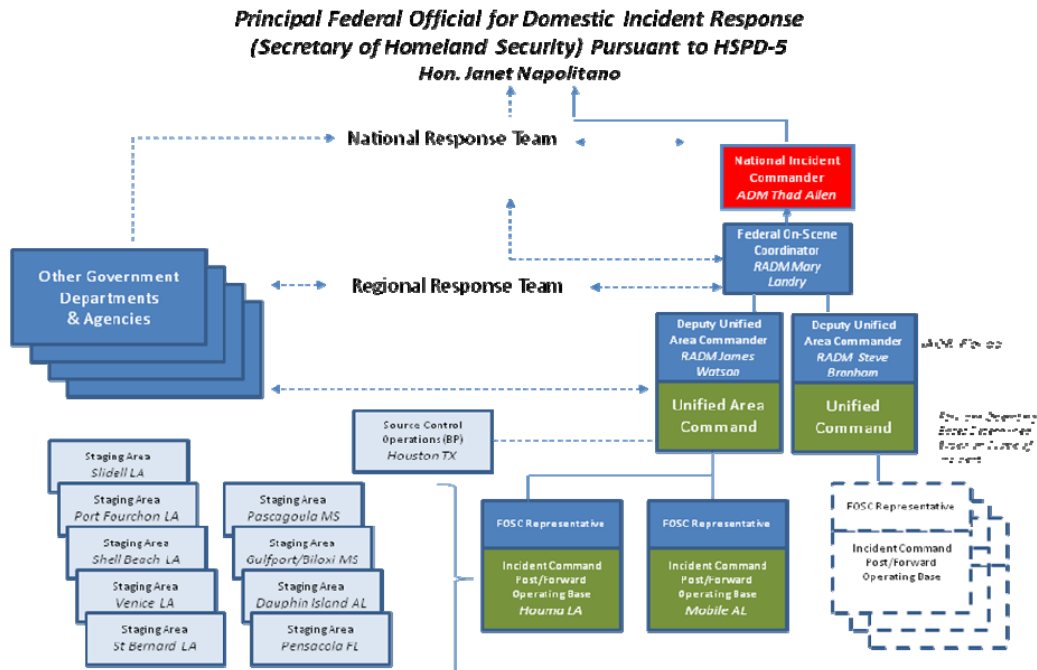
On the evening of April 20, 2010, the Transocean-owned, British Petroleum-chartered, Marshall Islands-flagged Mobile Offshore Drilling Unit (MODU) DEEPWATER HORIZON, located approximately 72 miles Southeast of Venice, Louisiana, reported an explosion and fire onboard. This began as a Search and Rescue (SAR) mission—within the first few hours, 115 of the 126 crewmembers were safely recovered; SAR activities continued through April 23<sup>rd</sup>, though the other 11 crewmembers remain missing.

Concurrent with the SAR effort, the response to extinguishing the fire and mitigating the impacts of the approximate 700,000 gallons of diesel fuel onboard began almost immediately, in accordance with the operator's Minerals Management Service (MMS)-approved Response Plan, oil spill response resources, including Oil Spill Response Vessels (OSRVs), were dispatched to the scene. After two days of fighting the fire, the MODU sank into approximately 5,000 feet of water on April 22<sup>nd</sup>. On April 23<sup>rd</sup>, remotely operated vehicles (ROVs) located the MODU on seafloor, and, on April 24<sup>th</sup>, BP found the first two leaks in the riser pipe and alerted the federal government. ROVs continue to monitor the flow of oil.



As the event unfolded, a robust Incident Command System (ICS) response organization was stood up in accordance with the National Response Framework (NRF) and the National Oil and Hazardous Substances Pollution Contingency Plan (NCP). ICS is utilized to provide a common method for developing and implementing tactical plans to efficiently and effectively manage the response to oil spills. . The ICS organization for this response includes Incident Command Posts and Unified Commands at the local level, and Unified Area Commands at the regional level. It is comprised of representatives from the Coast Guard (Federal On-Scene Coordinator (FOSC)), other federal, state, and local agencies, as well as BP as a Responsible Party.

# U.S. Government Response Structure



The federal government has addressed the Gulf Oil Spill with an all-hands-on deck approach from the moment the explosion occurred. During the night of April 20<sup>th</sup>—the date of the explosion—a command center was stood up on the Gulf Coast to address the potential environmental impact of the event and to coordinate with all state and local governments. After the MODU sank on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, the National Response Team (NRT), led by the Secretary of Homeland Security and comprised of 16 Federal agencies including the Coast Guard, other DHS offices, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Department of Interior (DOI), as well as Regional Response Teams (RRT), were activated.

On April 29, Secretary Napolitano declared the event a Spill of National Significance (SONS), which enhanced operational and policy coordination at the national level and concurrently allowed Admiral Allen’s appointment as the National Incident Commander (NIC) for the Administration’s continued, coordinated response. The NIC’s role is to coordinate strategic communications, national policy, and resource support, and to facilitate collaboration with key parts of the federal, state and local government.

The NIC staff is comprised of subject matter experts from across the federal government, allowing for immediate interagency collaboration, approval and coordination. While the FOSC maintains authorities for response operations as directed in the National Contingency Plan, the NIC’s primary focus is providing national-level support to the operational response. This means providing the Unified Command with everything that they need – from resources to policy decisions – to sustain their efforts to secure the source and mitigate the impact. This will be a sustained effort that will continue until the discharges are permanently stopped and the effects of the spill are mitigated to the greatest extent possible. Beyond securing the source of the spill, the Unified Command committed to minimizing the economic and social impacts to the affected communities and the nation.

## UNIFIED RECOVERY EFFORTS

The Unified Command continues to attack the spill offshore. As of May 13, 2010, over 5 million gallons of oily water have been successfully recovered using mechanical surface cleaning methods. Further, approximately 475,000 gallons of dispersants have been applied to break up the slick, and controlled burns have been used as weather conditions have allowed. In addition to the ongoing offshore oil recovery operations, significant containment and exclusion booms have been deployed and staged strategically throughout the Gulf region. These booms are used to protect sensitive areas including: environmental and cultural resources, and critical infrastructure, as identified in the applicable Area Contingency Plans (ACPs). To date, more



than a million feet of boom have been positioned to protect environmentally sensitive areas. Fourteen staging areas have been established across the Gulf Coast states and three regional command centers. The Department of Defense has activated National Guard troops; over 1,000 are currently deployed, and up to 17,500 have been approved for deployment.

## VOLUNTEERISM AND COMMUNICATION WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES

A critical aspect of response operations is active engagement and communication with the local communities. Several initiatives are underway to ensure regular communications with the local communities.

1. Active participation and engagement in town hall meetings across the region with industry and government involvement.
2. Daily phone calls with affected trade associations.
3. Coordination of public involvement through a volunteer registration hotline (1-866-448-5816), alternative technology, products and services e-mail ([horizonsupport@aol.com](mailto:horizonsupport@aol.com)), and response and safety training scheduled and conducted in numerous locations.
4. More than 7,100 inquiries received online via the response website ([www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com](http://www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com)) with more than 6,121 inquiries completed, with 4-hour average time of response.
5. Over 568,000 page hits on response website.
6. Over 110 documents created/posted to response website for public consumption.
7. News, photo/video releases, advisories to more than 5,000 media/governmental/private contacts.
8. Full utilization of social media including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Flickr.

9. Establishment of Local Government hotlines in Houma, LA (985-493-7835), Mobile, AL (251-445-8968), Robert, LA (985-902-5253).

## **MODU REGULATORY COMPLIANCE REQUIREMENTS**

43 U.S.C. 1331, *et seq* mandates that MODUs documented under the laws of a foreign nation, such as the DEEPWATER HORIZON, be examined by the Coast Guard. These MODUs are required to obtain a U.S. Coast Guard Certificate of Compliance (COC) prior to operating on the U.S. Outer Continental Shelf (OCS).

In order for the Coast Guard to issue a COC, one of three conditions must be met:

1. The MODU must be constructed to meet the design and equipment standards of 46 CFR part 108.
2. The MODU must be constructed to meet the design and equipment standards of the documenting nation (flag state) if the standards provide a level of safety generally equivalent to or greater than that provided under 46 CFR part 108.
3. The MODU must be constructed to meet the design and equipment standards for MODUs contained in the International Maritime Organization Code for the Construction and Equipment of MODUs.

The DEEPWATER HORIZON had a valid COC at the time of the incident, which was renewed July 29, 2009 with no deficiencies noted. The COC was issued based on compliance with number three, stated above. COCs are valid for a period of two years.

In addition to Coast Guard safety and design standards, MMS and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) also have safety requirements for MODUs. MMS governs safety and health regulations in regard to drilling and production operations in accordance 30 CFR part 250, and OSHA maintains responsibility for certain hazardous working conditions not covered by either the Coast Guard or MMS, as per 29 U.S.C. 653 (a) and (b)(1).

## **COAST GUARD / MMS JOINT INVESTIGATION RESPONSIBILITIES**

On April 27<sup>th</sup>, Secretary Napolitano and Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar signed the order that outlined the joint Coast Guard-MMS investigation into the Deepwater Horizon incident.

Information gathering began immediately after the explosion—investigators from both agencies launched a preliminary investigation that included evidence collection, interviews, witness statements from surviving crew members, and completion of chemical tests of the crew. The aim of this investigation is to gain an understanding of the causal factors involved in the explosion, fire, sinking and tragic loss of 11 crewmembers.

The joint investigation will include public hearings, which - have already begun in Kenner, LA. The formal joint investigation team consists of equal representation of Coast Guard and MMS members. The Coast Guard has also provided subject matter experts and support staff to assist in the investigation.

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM PAST RESPONSES

The Coast Guard has been combating oil and hazardous materials spills for many years; in particular, the 1989 major oil spill from the EXXON VALDEZ yielded comprehensive spill preparedness and response responsibilities.

In the 20 years since the EXXON VALDEZ, the Coast Guard has diligently addressed the Nation's mandates and needs for better spill response and coordination. For example, a SONS Exercise is held every three years. In 2002, the SONS Exercise was held in New Orleans to deal with the implications of a wellhead loss in the Gulf of Mexico. In that exercise, the SONS team created a vertically integrated organization to link local response requirements to a RRT. The requirements of the RRT are then passed to the NRT in Washington, D.C, thereby integrating the spill management and decision processes across the federal government. The response protocols used in the current response are a direct result of past lessons learned from real world events and exercises including SONS.



Although the EXXON VALDEZ spill shaped many of the preparedness and response requirements and legislation followed to this day, other significant events since 1989 have generated additional lessons learned that have informed our response strategies. For example, the M/V COSCO BUSAN discharged over 53,000 gallons of fuel oil into San Francisco Bay after colliding with the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge in heavy fog. Through the recovery of over 40 percent of the spilled product, the Unified Command recognized improvements were needed in some areas. As a result, new guidance and policy was developed to better utilize volunteers in future responses. Additionally, standard operating procedures for emergency notifications were improved to ensure better vertical communications between the federal responders and local governments. Furthermore, steps were taken to pre-identify incident command posts (ICPs) and improve booming strategies for environmentally sensitive areas.

Most recently, the Coast Guard led a SONS exercise in March, 2010. Nearly 600 people from over 37 agencies participated in the exercise. This exercise scenario was based on a catastrophic oil spill resulting from a collision between a loaded oil tanker and a car carrier off the coast of Portland, Maine. The exercise involved response preparedness activities in Portland, ME; Boston, MA; Portsmouth, NH; Portsmouth, VA,; and Washington, DC. The response to the SONS scenario involved the implementation of oil spill response plans, and response organizational elements including two Unified Commands, a Unified Area Command, and the NIC in accordance with the National Contingency Plan and national Response Framework. The exercise focused on three national-level strategic objectives:

1. Implement response organizations in applicable oil spill response plans
2. Test the organization's ability to address multi-regional coordination issues using planned response organizations
3. Communicate with the public and stakeholders outside the response organization using applicable organizational components

The SONS 2010 exercise was considered a success, highlighting the maturity of the inter-agency and private oil spill response capabilities and the importance of national-level interactions to ensure optimal information flow and situational awareness. The timely planning and execution of this national-level exercise have paid huge dividends in the response to this potentially catastrophic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

## **ROLE OF THE OIL SPILL LIABILITY TRUST FUND**

The Oil Spill Liability Trust Fund (OSLTF), established in the Treasury, is available to pay the expenses of federal response to oil pollution under the Federal Water Pollution Control Act (FWPCA)(33 USC §1321(c)) and to compensate claims for oil removal costs and certain damages caused by oil pollution as authorized by the Oil Pollution Act of 1990(OPA) (33 USC §2701 et seq). These OSLTF uses will be recovered from responsible parties liable under OPA when there is a discharge of oil to navigable waters, adjoining shorelines or the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

The OSLTF is established under Revenue Code section 9509 (26 USC §9509), which also describes the authorized revenue streams and certain broad limits on its use. The principal revenue stream is an 8 cent per barrel tax on oil produced or entered into the United States(see the tax provision at 26 USC §4611). The barrel tax increases to 9 cents for one year beginning on January 1, 2017. The tax expires at the end of 2017. Other revenue streams include oil pollution-related penalties under 33 USC §1319 and §1321, interest earned through Treasury investments, and recoveries from liable responsible parties under OPA. The current OSLTF balance is approximately \$1.6 billion. There is no cap on the fund balance but there are limits on its use per oil pollution incident. The maximum amount that may be paid from the OSLTF for any one incident is \$1 billion. Of that amount, no more than \$500 million may be paid for natural resource damages. 26 USC §9509(c)(2).

OPA further provides that the OSLTF is available to the President for certain purposes (33 USC §2712(a)). These include:

Payment of **federal removal costs** consistent with the NCP. This use is subject to further appropriation, except the President may make available up to \$50 million annually to carry out 33 USC §1321(c) (federal response authority) and to initiate the assessment of natural resource damages. This so-called “emergency fund” amount is available until expended. If funding in the emergency fund is deemed inadequate to fund federal response efforts, an additional \$100 million may be advanced from the OSLTF when the emergency fund is inadequate subject to notification of Congress no later than 30 days after the advance. See 33 USC §2752(b). Additional amounts from the OSLTF for Federal removal are subject to further appropriation.

Payment of **claims for uncompensated removal costs and damages**. Payments are not subject to further appropriation from the OSLTF. 33 USC §2752(b).

Payment of federal administrative, operating and personnel costs to implement and enforce the broad range of oil pollution prevention, response and compensation provisions addressed by the OPA. This use is subject to further appropriation to various responsible federal agencies.

## National Pollution Funds Center (NPFC) Funding and Cost Recovery

The NPFC is a Coast Guard unit that manages use of the emergency fund for federal removal and trustee costs to initiate natural resource damage assessment. The NPFC also pays qualifying claims against the OSLTF that are not compensated by the responsible party. Damages include real and personal property damages, natural resource damages, loss of subsistence use of natural resources, lost profits and earnings of businesses and individuals, lost government revenues, and net costs of increased or additional public services that may be recovered by a State or political subdivision of a state.

In a typical scenario, the FOOSC, Coast Guard or EPA accesses the emergency fund to carry out 33 USC §1321(c), i.e., to remove an oil discharge or prevent or mitigate a substantial threat of discharge of oil to navigable waters, the adjoining shoreline or the EEZ. Costs are documented and provided to NPFC for reconciliation and eventual cost recovery against liable responsible parties. Federal trustees may request funds to initiate an assessment of natural resource damages and the NPFC will provide those funds from the emergency fund as well.

Claims for OPA removal costs and damages that have been denied or not settled by the responsible party after 90 days may be presented to the NPFC for payment from the OSLTF. State claims for removal costs can be presented directly to the NPFC against the OSLTF. General claims provisions are delineated in 33 USC §2713 and the implementing claims regulations for claims against the OSLTF in 33 CFR 136.

OPA provides that all claims for removal costs or damages shall be presented first to the responsible party. Any person or government may be a claimant. If the responsible party denies liability for the claim, or the claim is not settled within 90 days after it is presented, a claimant may elect to commence an action in court against the responsible party or to present the claim to the NPFC for payment from the OSLTF. OPA provides an express exception to this order of presentment in respect to State removal cost claims. Such claims are not required to be presented first to the responsible party and may be presented direct to the NPFC for payment from the OSLTF. These and other general claims provisions are delineated in 33 USC section 2713 and the implementing regulations for claims against the OSLTF in 33 CFR Part 136. NPFC maintains information to assist claimants on its website at [www.uscg.mil/npfc](http://www.uscg.mil/npfc).

NPFC pursues cost recovery for all OSLTF expenses for removal costs and damages against liable responsible parties pursuant to federal claims collection law including the Debt Collection Act, implementing regulations at 31 CFR parts 901-904 and DHS regulations in 6 CFR part 11.

Aggressive collection efforts are consistent with the “polluter pays” public policy underlying the OPA. Nevertheless, the OSLTF is intended to pay even when a responsible party does not pay.  
OSLTF and the Deepwater Horizon

On May 12<sup>th</sup>, the Administration proposed a legislative package that will: enable the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill response to continue expeditiously; speed assistance to people affected by this spill; and strengthen and update the oil spill liability system to better address catastrophic events. The bill would permit the Coast Guard to obtain one or more advances -- up to \$100 million each -- from the Principal Fund within the Oil Spill Liability Trust Fund to underwrite federal response activities taken in connection with the discharge of oil that began in 2010 in connection with the explosion on, and sinking of, the mobile offshore drilling unit Deepwater Horizon. To

deal more generally with the harms created by oil spills as well as to toughen and update these laws, the bill would, for any single incident, raise the statutory expenditure limitation for the Oil Spill Liability Trust Fund from \$1 billion to \$1.5 billion and the cap on natural resource damage assessments and claims from \$500 million to \$750 million.

The emergency fund has been accessed by the FOSC for \$65 million as of May 11, 2010. BP, a responsible party, is conducting and paying for most response activities. The Coast Guard requested and received an advance of \$100 million from the OSLTF principal fund to the emergency fund as authorized by 33 USC §2752(b), because the balance remaining in the emergency fund was not adequate to fund anticipated federal removal costs. The BP and Transocean have been notified of their responsibility to advertise to the public the process by which claims may be presented. As of May 13<sup>th</sup>, 8160 claims have been opened with BP, and nearly \$5.3 million has been disbursed; though Transocean has also already been designated as a responsible party, all claims are being processed centrally through BP.

## **CONCLUSION**

Through the National Incident Command, we are ensuring all capabilities and resources—government, private, and commercial—are being leveraged to protect the environment and facilitate a rapid, robust cleanup effort. Every effort is being made to secure the source of the oil, remove the oil offshore, protect the coastline, include and inform the local communities in support of response operations, and mitigate any impacts of the discharge.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.