Spill Prevention & Response

Tampa Bay is a bustling center of maritime commerce, with more than 4,000 large vessel transits each year supporting three deepwater ports. Petroleum products accounted for 38% of the cargo traffic at the Port of Tampa in 2005, followed by products related to the fertilizer industry.

Photo by Mary Kelley Hoppe

SP-1

Establish an Integrated Vessel Traffic Information System for Tampa Bay and Permanently Fund the PORTS System

ACTION:

Establish an integrated vessel traffic information system for Tampa Bay and secure permanent funding for the PORTS navigational system.

STATUS:

Ongoing.

BACKGROUND:

A significant portion of this action has been completed, with the establishment of a coordinated Vessel Tracking Information System (VTIS) for the bay financed by a consortium of maritime interests, including the Tampa Port Authority. And, although a permanent funding source for PORTS has not yet been found, current contributions from all three bay counties will secure PORTS funding through 2008.

VTIS has equipped all harbor pilots with shipboard laptop computers linked to a differential GPS system using Automated Identification System (AIS) technology that provides real-time information on shipping traffic in Tampa Bay. The pilots can see precisely where they and all other ships nearby are located at any given time, and coordinate that information with weather and current data to guard against collisions or groundings. Since installation of AIS/VTIS, there have been no serious ship-to-ship collisions in the bay.

Up-to-the-minute information about tides, winds and currents in Tampa Bay is available to all mariners (recreational boaters included) through the Physical Oceanographic Real-Time System (PORTS), a network of data collection buoys and sensors located at key positions around the bay.

PORTS was created by NOAA and is maintained by the University of South Florida Department of Marine Science. The system can be accessed online or by telephone.

Hillsborough County has committed to partially fund PORTS for six years from its share of phosphate severance tax revenue. The City of St. Petersburg made a one time financial payment to PORTS. Pinellas County has not yet agreed to financial support. Manatee County has secured a one-time grant of $150,000 through FDEP from NOAA to support PORTS.

TBEP should continue to follow implementation of the VTIS and support a secure funding source for PORTS.

STRATEGY:

STEP 1 Continue to monitor implementation of VTIS system.

Responsible Parties: Tampa Port Authority, Coast Guard, TBEP, ABM

Schedule: Ongoing

STEP 2 Continue to track and support permanent funding of PORTS through local, state, federal or private funding sources. Funds are also needed for technical upgrades.

Responsible Parties: Local governments, USF, TBEP, FDEP, ABM

Schedule: Ongoing

Evaluate and Update Oil and Hazardous Material Spill Response Plans for Priority Areas

SP-2

ACTION:

Monitor implementation of oil and hazardous material spill response plans.

STATUS:

Complete.

BACKGROUND:

The U.S. Coast Guard Area Contingency Plan (ACP), the strategic plan for responding to oil spills in Southwest Florida, was first completed in 1993, just one month before a three-vessel collision at the entrance to Tampa Bay left more 300,000 gallons of oil in its wake. Formal updates to the behemoth document – which spells out response protocols, identifies response equipment and personnel, and sensitive areas and resources – are required every five years, but revisions to individual sections occur more
frequently as critical new information becomes available.

One of the most significant efforts of the last decade has been to convert the paper plan into an interactive, electronic tool. That feat was accomplished in 2001 when the Fish and Wildlife Research Institute, together with the U.S. Coast Guard, Florida Bureau of Emergency Response and NOAA, released the nation's first electronic ACP. The online version eases the complicated process of planning for spills with internal and external hotlinks that simplify navigation and access to critical maps, information and real-time data.

The computer version also includes a Geographic Information System (GIS) that allows spill planners to view digital maps depicting sensitive ecological resources, public beaches and populations – or create custom maps to see what types of plants and animals might be affected by a potential spill. One of the most powerful GIS tools is the Florida Marine Spill Analysis System (FMSAS), which allows users to coordinate spill planning activities and manage response and mitigation efforts during an actual spill. FMSAS uses layers of geographic data, imagery and specialized tools to provide spatial analysis that can be distributed quickly as maps, tables and charts, enabling decision-makers to direct containment and cleanup operations and minimize ecological and economic loss.

Continued monitoring of updates to the ACP, along with spill training exercises that test readiness and response, will help maintain the region's preparedness.

NOAA's Damage Assessment Center is also forming a Cooperative Trustee-Industry Pre-Spill Coordination Team, and is currently enlisting electric utilities and petroleum and chemical handlers to participate. The objective of the Pre-Spill Coordination Team is to equip the participants with a standardized set of equipment and train them

in approved NOAA techniques to allow the collection of "ephemeral data" just prior to the impact of spills. These data provide characterization of baseline conditions which both NOAA and the industries can agree exist in an area expected to be impacted.

STRATEGY:

STEP 1 Continue to monitor the updating of the Area Contingency Plan and spill drills designed to test response capabilities. Incorporate individual facility response plans into the ACP database.

Responsible parties: US Coast Guard, local governments/agencies, industries

Schedule: Ongoing

STEP 2 Periodically incorporate unannounced drills, withholding announcement of the spill scenario until the day of the exercise but providing advance notification of the timing of the drill.

Responsible parties: US Coast Guard

Schedule: Ongoing

STEP 3 Encourage petroleum product handlers to participate in a Cooperative Trustee-Industry Pre-Spill Coordination Team.

Responsible parties: Petroleum product handlers, NOAA, US Coast Guard, Industry Trade Groups

Schedule: Upon formation of the Coordination Team

STEP 4 Encourage other hazardous materials handlers to consider a similar program.

Responsible parties: Hazardous material handlers, LEPC, EPA, US Coast Guard, Industry Trade Groups

Schedule: Upon formation of the Coordination Team

STEP 5 Report traffic patterns, tonnage and changes in ship traffic to the Agency on Bay Management on a regular basis.

Responsible parties: Tampa Port Authority, Port Manatee, ABM

Schedule: Yearly annual report