

Introduction

Oil spills affect wildlife. Whether the spill occurs on land, in saltwater or in freshwater, there is a strong possibility that wildlife will be impacted. Birds are the most commonly impacted animal during an oil spill but animals such as sea otters, river otter, raccoons, muskrats, seals, and killer whales can also be affected. Oiled wildlife response operations are generally coordinated by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

Background

Wildlife rescue activities in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho are guided by the [Wildlife Response Plan](#) in Chapter 9970 of the [Northwest Area Contingency Plan](#). The Wildlife Response Plan describes how the personnel and equipment used to respond to oiled wildlife will be mobilized under the direction of the Wildlife Branch. The Wildlife Branch is located within the Operations Section of the Incident Command and is responsible for all oiled wildlife response activities, personnel, and equipment.

Effects of Oil on Wildlife

Oil is toxic to animals when ingested and can cause chemical burns when it comes in contact with skin and eyes. It can also cause fur and feathers to become matted. Animals that do not possess blubber rely on their fur or feathers to insulate them from the cold water and weather of the Pacific Northwest. Without the insulation provided by their fur or feathers, these animals become vulnerable to hypothermia which can lead to death. There are a number of variables that affect animal survival rates once they become oiled. These variables can include; the species impacted, the type of oil,

the time of year, the amount of time it takes to recover an oiled animal, and the quality of care that the animal receives after being recovered.



Harbor Seal Pup – Photo by Barry Troutman



Common Murres – WDFW Photo

Reporting Oiled Wildlife

Visibly oiled wildlife observed in Washington should be reported to the Washington Emergency Management Division at 1-800-258-5990. Oiled wildlife observed in Oregon should be reported to the Oregon Emergency Response System at 1-800-452-0311. Reporting information should include the date and time of the observation, the number and location of the animals observed, and their ability to fly or move. The information that you submit will be forwarded to the appropriate agencies.

Response Actions

An oiled wildlife response requires personnel with specialized training, experience, and facilities to effectively capture and rehabilitate animals. The spill size and location, time of year, and the type of oil all play a significant role in determining the complexity of the response. The primary activities associated with a wildlife response include search and capture, field stabilization, transportation to the rehabilitation center, rehabilitation, and release. Hazing (scaring) animals is used in certain situations to attempt to move un-oiled animals away from oiled areas. Once oiled, it may take days before an animal has become weak enough that it can be captured. Generally speaking the capture crews are able to capture birds and smaller marine and terrestrial mammals such as sea otters, seal pups, muskrat, etc. Reptiles are caught on occasion as well. Unfortunately, there are no emergency facilities for treating large cetaceans (whales, dolphins, and porpoises) and large pinnipeds (seals and sea lions) exposed to oil.

Planning and Preparation

Having pre-existing facilities, trained personnel, and a plan to use them in place before a spill can greatly improve the success of a response. Oiled wildlife response involves a lot of people, equipment, time, and coordination. Being prepared before a spill happens is critical to maintaining the ability to respond quickly and efficiently during a spill. Preparation includes the development of wildlife response facilities/equipment, training personnel, use of wildlife care volunteers, and practicing (drilling) how these resources will be used during a spill. Tabletop drills are used to practice the organizational/administrative aspects of a response. Equipment drills ensure that the equipment is ready to be used.

Wildlife response personnel come from various state and federal agencies, the responsible party, professional wildlife and spill response organizations, and/or citizen volunteers. Facility resources in the Northwest are comprised primarily of two mobile oiled wildlife rehabilitation facilities. Each mobile facility has a planning capacity of 100 birds (based on common murrens and a "modeled" spill event) and can be deployed and setup anywhere within Washington State within 24 hours. The PAWS Wildlife Center in Lynnwood Washington and the West Sound Wildlife Shelter on Bainbridge Island are also capable of handling a small number of oiled animals.

Wildlife Care Volunteers

When there are significant impacts to wildlife from spills, there may be a need to use citizen volunteers. When volunteers are used during a spill response they are coordinated by the Incident Command and are assigned roles that are appropriate to their training.

Oiled Wildlife Capture

Oiled wildlife capture and rehabilitation should not be attempted by the general public; it should be left to those who have the proper training, permits, and facilities. Untrained individuals who attempt to capture animals risk personal injury to themselves, potential for disease transmission from animals to humans, and injury to the animals.

The Northwest Area Committee policy on use of volunteers gives preference to those who have received previous training and are affiliated with an existing volunteer organization. Pre-trained, affiliated volunteers will be contacted and used before untrained and unaffiliated volunteers. If you are interested in becoming a volunteer for oiled wildlife response please send an email to oilwildlifevolunteers@ecy.wa.gov.



Mallard Duck Being Washed
– WDFW Photo