

Marine Oil Spill Prevention

Prevention of an oil spill is our best option to protect the environment. Federal, state, and local agencies work together with industry to reduce the risk of oil spills. At the Federal level, the U.S. Coast Guard provides services, oversight of commercial mariners to ensure safe commerce and environmental protection.



Drydock examinations are routine, comprehensive safety checks

Vessel and Facility Prevention

Federal, state, and local agencies regulate oil handling vessels and facilities. Regulations target vessel and facility construction, maintenance, and operations to reduce the threat of oil spills and other undesirable incidents. National procedural and mechanical requirements help maintain a standard of safety on vessels and at facilities. Vessels that fly the U.S. flag must pass regular Coast Guard inspections to keep the documents necessary to sail. However, 90% of U.S. commercial port calls are by vessels flying foreign flags. Foreign vessels are checked by the Coast Guard based on a risk ranking derived from flag state, classification society, owner, and vessel history. These targeted compliance checks reduce risks posed by foreign ships.

Land-based facilities can also be a source of oil discharges and are subject to regulation and periodic inspection by federal, state, and local agencies. Secondary containment is required at the tanks of such facilities to prevent the spread of spilled oil.

Prevention Through People

The USCG implemented a new strategic over-arching prevention program in 1996, Prevention Through People (PTP). The PTP program was created because most spills and most serious accidents are caused by human error. PTP emphasizes the role of people in preventing casualties and pollution.

Safety Initiatives

Recognizing that different segments of the maritime community have different needs, the USCG is working on various initiatives to minimize the potential of an oil spill as the result of maritime transport of petroleum. International efforts with Port State Control (the efforts of nations to reduce risks from foreign vessels) have enhanced the safety of deep draft vessels, including oil tankers. In July of 1998, the USCG began enforcing the International Safety Management (ISM) code for tankers. The USCG will not allow ships and companies into U.S. ports if they fail to meet ISM certification standards. For barges, the USCG will encourage the tank barge community to come into voluntary compliance with the American Waterways Operators' Responsible Carrier Program. Implementation of international and regional safety standards will help prevent maritime accidents and ocean oil spills.

Enforcement and Liability

Penalties from the enforcement of federal and state laws provide another incentive for the maritime community to comply with regulated standards, as sanctions range from letters of warning to criminal prosecution. The expanded limits of liability that apply to regulated vessels and facilities during an oil spill are completely removed if the spill was a result of gross negligence, willful misconduct, or a violation of federal safety, construction, or operating regulations.

Investigation, Continual Improvement

Even with the most effective prevention measures in place, accidents do occur. Investigations take place after a spill occurs to find the cause and identify ways to prevent future accidents. Investigations may take several paths including legislative action, public involvement to encourage risk reduction, and regulatory changes.

Spill Planning and Preparedness

Because prevention efforts cannot eliminate all risks of transporting oil over water, facilities and vessels are required to plan for and conduct response actions if an accident occurs. Trained employees can use the plans and drills to their advantage to help minimize damages in the event of a spill.

Additional information is available from the sources and contacts listed on the opposite side of this sheet.