

Offshore Oil Spill Response

The following is a compilation of ideas, concerns and recommendations made during the Oil Spill Response & Stakeholder Engagement workshop, held on August 15, 201. They are not necessarily attributable to any one person, organization or group but represent a general consensus among event participants.

A tool kit for mitigating concerns about off shore oil exploration

Industry experts, scholars and resident Alaskans convened last August to participate in the annual Week of the Arctic Oil Spill Response & Stakeholder Engagement workshop. The workshop's mission is to increase the ability to mitigate risks associated with a heavier level of activity in the northern latitudes, including the inherent risks of oil-based exposure.

This year's session expanded upon previous year's agendas to cover more extensive lists of variables associated with oil spill pollution and established a more diverse set of circumstances in the Arctic's frigid waters than the generic "Deepwater-Horizon in ice" oil spill scenario.

Environmental change will affect production development. Some of these factors include: current shifts in the Chukchi Sea; the viscosity of oil once it is potentially released; shifting ice flows; seasonal darkness; and variable cloud and fog patterns. These factors must be considered in any scenario involving oil spill cleanup. The lack of data pertaining specifically to ocean current directions, tidal patterns and other maritime information was a key topic of interest during the workshop. It was stressed that as industry develops within the region, it is essential to research and collect data on weather, tides, ice flows and other factors that would greatly limit the effectiveness of a spill response. Additionally, this data must be shared and integrated into a region-wide spill response database.

Prevention should be the initial and primary focus of any activity which could cause a spill. Precaution must be carried out in congruence with mitigation measures and followed by a secondary plan. That said, it is critical that any back up plan be well-conceived and adaptable to an environment that doesn't fit well with standard industry practice or data-based theory. The lack of U.S. offshore production in the Arctic Region makes imperative the acquisition of critical data necessary to increase understanding of the maritime environment.

The first major point that should be emphasized is that a vast majority of seaborne oil is released through shipping and land-based sources of pollution. This means that the scale of response needed by stakeholders in the region includes the ability to not only respond to a "doomsday" production response scenario but the more frequent threats of a small-scale maritime spills. This presents stakeholders in the region with a high level of responsibility regarding their logistical capability and equipment acquisitions.

Also identified was a need for adaptation within the regulatory environment for responding to changing physical conditions as well as avoiding a "one size fits all" approach to oil containment within the Arctic.

Normative policies for more temperate latitudes are ill-suited for the unpredictable environmental conditions of the Arctic. The above-mentioned regulatory deficiency is discouraging potential offshore production as well as denying spill responders a solid legal framework in order to begin the development of physical and human assets in the high north.

Stakeholder involvement was another prominent issue discussed during the workshop. Tribal food security, environmental security, tribal health and tribal involvement in any aspect of development are important and require recognition. Education, training and the ability for those peoples on the Arctic's coast to assist in the protection of an ecosystem that sustains their culture are vital and sociologically-responsible policy goals. Local involvement provides a way to educate local stakeholders on the importance of oil spill response in the Arctic while allowing the integration of a cultural lens into response activities via active and informed indigenous participation. AES' Spill Recovery Service was an example of how equilibrium can be achieved in preparedness development, indigenous participation, and local involvement. As an Alaska Native owned corporation, AES has the ability to serve as an example incorporating indigenous interest into the discussion of Arctic spill recovery.

Stakeholder engagement is also a critical issue, specifically in regards to the innovation needed to convey the likely success of spill response and prevention. It is strongly suggested and argued that Alaskans do not feel secure, largely due to the stigma associated with the environmental ramification of an ecological disaster. There is a lack of stakeholder knowledge about the wealth of spill prevention and response infrastructure in the state. No one ever hears about "the spill that never happened" on the nightly news. So in order to foster a culture of successful pollution prevention techniques are used to increase the confidence of spill response services in the Arctic, those success stories need to be front and center. By informing Alaskans about the securities in place, the state and industry can better perform their tasks with more local support.

A wide array of interests was represented at the workshop, including tribal rights in a spill situation, an issue that will affect the Arctic marine environment (an all-encompassing life medium in the region). It must be expected that an environmental disaster of this variety would indeed reach across many interests in the state. There is an overall need for an increased understanding of the issues on this topic, including mitigating all sources of oil leakage, understanding environmental factors which can adversely affect both an oil spill and the response effort needed. Finally, the dialogue development between a variety of sectors to discuss how this mitigation can better address the security concerns of Alaskans living in the possible wake of an oil spill is imperative.