

NOAA Resources at Risk Summary (March 26, 2009)

Resources at Risk for the Drift River Tank Farm, Cook Inlet, AK

I. Incident Information

This report was prepared at 1000 EST on 26 March 2009. Mt. Redoubt, located approximately 100 nm SW of Anchorage on the West Side of Cook Inlet erupted 5 times on 23 March 2009. These eruptions caused lahars, extensive flooding, and mud flows around the Drift River Tank Farm, where oil from the Cook Inlet fields is temporarily stored prior to shipping out aboard tankers. Currently, two of the four active tanks have 74,000 bbls of crude oil apiece. This report covers resources potentially at risk from the present time to 30 days from now.

II. Geographic Region Covered

The area covered by this report includes the Drift River, Rust Slough, and environs in Redoubt Bay, Cook Inlet. This area does not necessarily correspond to actual or potential oil locations. Consult other Hotline reports for oil location information.

III. Expected Behavior of the Spilled Material

Cook Inlet, Drift River Terminal Crude (API 34.1) is a light to medium weight crude oil. This product may coat the intertidal environment, as well as wildlife on the water surface. The product may also result in water column and benthic impacts if mixed into the water column, or if it strands in large amounts in shallow, sheltered areas. While the focus of this report is on resource impacts resulting from a crude oil release, the likelihood is that impacts would be unpredictable due the dynamic nature of a volcanic eruption and subsequent natural disasters, such as floods, mudslides, etc. If oil is released, chances are that it would be mixed with mud, water, debris (e.g., mud, gravel, trees, etc.), and potentially in very large volumes.

IV. Shoreline Resources at Risk

The shoreline along the Drift River, Rust Slough, and Redoubt Bay is predominantly extensive marsh. There are large exposed tidal flats extending 2 or more nm offshore of the Drift River in Redoubt Bay. There are pockets of sand/gravel beaches at the Drift River mouth and elsewhere along the coast. The tidal range is approximately 23 feet.

The most sensitive habitats in the area are coastal and riparian marshes, which are often highly productive, serving as important wildlife habitat for migratory and nesting birds, and nursery areas for fish and shellfish. The marsh vegetation is likely under a period of winter senescence (vegetation growth is dormant); therefore, the key concern at this time of year is if the lighter fractions of the oil penetrate into the marsh sediments and any wrack/litter. Lighter fractions of the oil may be acutely toxic to wetland vegetation, especially if oil penetrates into the sediments. Where wetland sediments are muddy and soft, it is important to prevent excessive disturbance and further mixing of oil into the substrate by foot traffic during cleanup activities, as this could

result in more severe and long-term impacts to the marshes. If large volumes of mud, water, and debris are introduced into the marshes, along with oil, damages to the habitat and associated species would be extensive.

Tidal flats are also sensitive habitats. Biological utilization of tidal flats is often high, and organisms that are buried in the sediments will likely be severely impacted. Oil usually does not penetrate into the sediments of tidal flats, because they are tightly packed and heavily water-saturated, but rather, oil will cover portions of the flats at low tide, and then be re-floated at high tide. Organisms living in the flats may be smothered during low tide.

Oil may penetrate into mixed sand and gravel beaches. This oil is difficult to remove and may become a source of chronic sheening. On mixed sand and gravel beaches oil may form a band of oil or a greasy stain on the substrate, especially along the high-tide line. Heavier accumulations could penetrate into the sediments. Lighter oils tend to penetrate deeper than heavy oils, and penetration is greatest in coarse, well-sorted sediments. Along exposed, high-energy areas, surface contamination may be quickly removed, while in low-energy areas, sheens may be released during high tide.

V. Biological Resources at Risk

Birds

While bird use of the area is likely limited in late winter, many migratory species arrive in spring (April-May). The Redoubt Bay Critical Habitat Area (268 square miles of wetlands and riparian habitat) provides spring resting and feeding habitat for hundreds of thousands of waterfowl on their way to northern nesting grounds. It is well known as the largest nesting area for the Tule white-fronted goose in the world. It is also heavily used for nesting by other geese and swan species (e.g., cackling Canada goose, Taverner's Canada goose, lesser Canada goose, snow goose, and tundra and trumpeter swans). Diving and dabbling ducks arriving in the spring for summer breeding (tens of thousands) may include: pintail, mallard, green-winged teal, northern shoveler, canvasback, lesser scaup, bufflehead, redhead, gadwall, American wigeon, and common eider. Shorebirds utilizing the area during spring migration include: yellowlegs, snipe, godwits, whimbrels, sandpipers, plovers, dunlin, and phalaropes. Sandhill cranes (a few nesting pairs), ravens, and gulls may be present in spring. There is a bald eagle nest along the Drift River.

Waterfowl are usually at high risk during oil spills because they spend a lot of time on the water surface and in wetlands. Gulls and shorebirds can also be severely impacted by oil. Direct oiling of birds reduces the buoyancy, water repellency, and insulation provided by feathers, and may result in death by drowning or hypothermia. Preening of oiled feathers may also result in ingestion of oil resulting in irritation, sickness, or death. Oil brought back to the nests by adult birds may kill or injure eggs and young birds.

Fish

Coho salmon run up the Drift River in the summer and fall. Eggs hatch in early spring and embryos may be present in gravel until they emerge in May and June where they occupy shallow stream margins. Coho, pink, and sockeye salmon and Dolly Varden may be present in Rust Slough and Cannery Creek. Pink fry swim out of the gravel and migrate downstream in late

winter or spring. Sockeye fry also emerge in early spring and move to rearing areas. Dolly Varden eggs hatch in March with emergence in April or May followed by rearing in streams.

Larval and juvenile fish are especially sensitive because they inhabit shallow waters, are less mobile, and are more sensitive to oil toxicity. Eggs and fry would be impacted by large additions of sediment, debris, etc. into the sloughs and rivers.

Invertebrates

Extensive razor clam beds occur off of Rust Slough and Cannery Creek. The largest razor clam fishery in Alaska occurs on the eastern beaches of Cook Inlet, which is on the opposite bank of the area of present concern. Most razor clam digging occurs from April through September (peak in early summer), and there is no limit on west side Cook Inlet beaches. Razor clams may be smothered by the crude oil and tainting from lighter fractions of the oil may be a concern. A large influx of sediment (mud) onto shellfish beds would cause smothering of the organisms.

Marine Mammals

Harbor seals, killer whales, harbor porpoises, beluga whales, and Dall's porpoise are present in Redoubt Bay. Haul-outs, rookeries, and concentration areas for seals and whales occur in Cook Inlet, but fall outside the immediate area of concern at the present time.

VI. Human-Use Resources at Risk

The Redoubt Bay Critical Habitat Area (managed by ADF&G) occurs along the west side of Cook Inlet including Rust and Cannery Creeks and Drift River. Facilities in the area include: Drift River Terminal and Christy Lee Loading Facility.