



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs): New *Dispersant Use Plan for Alaska*
(Also see ADEC Dispersant Fact Sheet at <https://dec.alaska.gov/spar/ppr/docs/ADEC%20Dispersant%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>)

What are dispersants?

Dispersants are chemical compounds which, when applied correctly under the right conditions, break crude oils into smaller droplets, reducing the slick's surface area and threats to surface species, and making the oil droplets much more available to natural microbial degradation. They are not used on small spills or on spills of lighter products (i.e., diesel, gasoline, hydraulic oils, etc.)

Why are dispersants needed in Alaska?

Dispersants are needed in Alaska mainly to provide another option when responding to large accidental discharges of certain oils in Alaska's offshore waters. Mechanical means (i.e., skimmers, boom, sorbent materials) of recovery of oil remain the preferred response methods because they physically remove oil from the environment. However, under certain circumstances dispersants use may be considered when mechanical recovery alone is ineffective or insufficient. Response leaders need dispersants – and other alternative tools such as burning – available in their 'toolbox' for situations when they are the most appropriate response tactic based on a thorough assessment of environmental benefits and impacts.

Federal regulations for facility and vessel response plans require that unless pre-authorization of dispersant use is in place, industry plan holders are not required to pre-arrange dispersant capability. The main goal of reinstating preauthorization in Alaska is to ensure all response tactics are available in the unlikely event of a crude-laden tanker spill in the waters of the Aleutian Islands/Great Circle Route and the approaches to Cook Inlet and Prince William Sound.

Have dispersants been authorized in Alaska?

Yes. Dispersant use has been an authorized response tactic in Alaska's waters for many years. Under current rules, dispersants may only be applied to a spill if there is concurrence at the time of the spill from the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the State of Alaska (if the State is affected or potentially affected) and after consultation with the U.S. Department of the Interior and the U.S. Department of Commerce.

What is 'Preauthorization' of dispersant use and why is it important?

Preauthorization of dispersants is an intergovernmental administrative pre-approval from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the State of Alaska, the U.S. Department of the Interior and the U.S. Department of Commerce which allows the U.S. Coast Guard expedited authority to mobilize dispersant use personnel and equipment. Preauthorization was in place for large areas of the internal waters of Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet until September 2008.

Due to Alaska's vastness, remoteness, and lack of infrastructure, initiating spill response operations in a timely manner is of the utmost importance to ensure maximum protection of our pristine environment. Preauthorization gives the U.S. Coast Guard federal on-scene coordinator (FOSC) the authority to immediately direct personnel and equipment to mobilize to the spill once it is determined dispersant may be needed. However, the policy requires notification of natural resource trustees, local and tribal governments, and various stakeholders before dispersant is applied to the slick.

What are some differences under this new policy?

The new policy is quite different from the pre-September 2008 version. One of the biggest changes is that there is only one Preauthorization Area in this plan, and everywhere else, the so-called Undesignated Area, is considered on a "case-by case" basis.

- The Preauthorization Area is outside of internal waters. It extends from 24 nautical miles (nm) offshore (the U.S. Contiguous Zone, which is shown on most nautical charts) to the Exclusive Economic Zone 200 nm offshore south of Alaska's mainland and islands in the Prince William Sound, Cook Inlet, Kodiak, Bristol Bay & Aleutian subareas and from 24 nm to 100 nm north of the Aleutian Islands.
- It's pinned to the mainland at Cape Suckling & Cape Sarichef to prevent tankers from skirting around the Preauthorization Area into Prince William Sound or through Unimak Pass into an Undesignated Area.
- In addition, there will be an outreach effort and inclusive process to designate particular areas within the Preauthorization Area where dispersant use should be avoided. These areas are then treated on a case-by-case basis and get special consideration even though they may be within the overall Preauthorization Area.

What is the process for authorizing use of dispersant outside the Preauthorization Area?

Outside the Preauthorization Area, in the Undesignated Area, the decision is made jointly by the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the State of Alaska (if the State is affected or potentially affected) after consultation with the U.S. Department of the Interior and the U.S. Department of Commerce. Local and tribal governments and various stakeholders are also engaged during the process.

How are federally-recognized tribes, local communities, native corporations, and RCACs involved in decision making for use of dispersants?

Federally recognized tribes, local communities, and others can be involved in decision making for use of dispersants in several ways. Before an incident, in the planning & policy development phase, these entities can participate in the subarea committee covering their geographic area of concern. They can also participate in the Alaska Regional Response Team (ARRT) meetings covering statewide policy matters. During a response these groups may also seek involvement in the Regional Stakeholder Committee (RSC), an advisory body to unified command response leaders. Input from federally-recognized tribes, local community representatives, and others may also be proactively sought by the response planning team during dispersant consideration processes required for the Preauthorization Area and the Undesignated Area.

Are there other limitations or precautions to Preauthorization?

Yes. The use protocols are highly detailed and strictly followed. For example, dispersant application cannot impede mechanical recovery efforts; Preauthorization is only for spills of crude oils as cargo from tank vessels bound to or from a U.S. port; Small test applications are required before large scale dispersant use; and Intensive monitoring for effectiveness of the dispersant is required. There are numerous specific time, space, condition, and species presence limitations as well (i.e., use in offshore waters; application only via aerial and surface craft; prohibiting application near groups of wildlife and fish).

Are there exceptions to these rules?

Yes. There is one exception. Under current federal law, the FOSC may authorize dispersant use anywhere, without concurrence of anyone else, to prevent or substantially reduce loss of human life.

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