



Tanker and Barge Collision in New Orleans, LA Update July 23, 1:00 p.m EDT

Situation Overview:

Early this morning a 600-foot chemical tanker and 200-foot fuel barge collided near downtown New Orleans, LA. The barge "DM932" was "ripped in half," discharging an estimated 419,000 gallons of #6 fuel oil. For reference, the recent Cosco Busan spill involved about 53,000 gallons of similar fuel oil spilling into San Francisco Bay. The two sections of the barge are just upriver of the Crescent City Connector Bridge. As of 0730 local time, the leading edge of the slick was already 16 miles downriver. The double-hulled tanker "Tintomara," loaded with styrene and biodiesel, was damaged but is reportedly not leaking. The status of the tug "Mel Oliver" has not been reported. No injuries have been reported and the accident is under investigation. Twenty-nine miles of the Mississippi River is closed to vessel traffic, shutting down the Port of New Orleans which services 6000 vessels a year. Twelve vessels are waiting to transit through the affected area, five down river and seven up river. In addition, the New Orleans downtown ferry service is restricted from passing through the affected area.



Tugs holding sections of the ruptured barge just upstream of the Crescent City Bridge. USCG Photo

The barge owners have activated their spill response plan and a company incident response team is en route. Oil Spill Response Organizations (OSROs) have been activated and are deploying spill protection and recovery equipment down river. The initial response strategy is to protect cuts in the river, deploy deflection booms to protect sensitive areas, and contain oil in collection areas downriver. The company has also retained an environmental consulting firm to address natural resource issues.

Initial NOAA Response:

The NOAA Scientific Support Coordinator (SSC) Charlie Henry (Office of Response and Restoration) was notified by the US Coast Guard (USCG) and is

currently at the Command Center in New Orleans. The SSC will provide scientific support to the USCG Federal On-Scene Coordinator. In situations like this NOAA promotes better decision making by predicting the trajectory of spilled oil, identifying sensitive natural resources, observing the location of oil from helicopters, conducting damage assessment studies, and providing a range of other scientific services. The NOAA Support Team in Seattle was notified approximately 3 am PDT, and quickly prepared a trajectory forecast of the spilled oil. The team also began collecting weather and river current information. OR&R has also activated 2 response contractors to assist with information management and natural resource issues. All information and products are summarized in NOAA's ResponseLINK <https://responselink.orr.noaa.gov/login> bulletin board. Anyone with a NOAA email account can log into this system for more complete and updated information.

Initial Overflight Results:

The USCG conducted an overflight of the river at first light (0730 CDT). At that time the barge was still leaking oil. Heavy concentrations of black oil was observed along the River Walk area along the West descending bank (French Quarter). At that time, approximately 14 miles of river had black oil and silver sheen with an estimated 90% coverage. The leading edge of the slick was at River Mile 80 (the collision was at RM 96), where the observers found black streamers about 20 meters long and 20 meters off both banks. This matched well with the initial trajectory prediction.



Silver sheen and black oil streamers. Vessel in background is not part of the incident. USCG Photo

NOAA Staffing Plan:

The Regional SSC and Assistant SSC are on-scene. Two additional support staff are also on-scene. The OR&R Regional Assessment and Restoration Coordinator has also been activated and is working with the other federal and state resource management agencies. Three OR&R staff in Seattle are on standby to travel. The SSC for the Great Lakes is on standby and two additional OR&R staff in travel status in the New Orleans region working on Hurricane Katrina recovery projects have been notified.

Next Steps:

The NOAA team will continue to assist the USCG in tracking the spill. The spilled oil is persistent and little is expected to evaporate. At this point the fate of the oil is uncertain and if light winds persist the oil may spread as far as the Head of Passes near the outlet of the Mississippi River. As the oil moves down river it will encounter increasingly sensitive environmental areas. As the spill strands along the river banks the NOAA Team will begin to conduct systematic shoreline assessments to support cleanup decision-making.

Longer Term Issues:

Currently the Assessment and Restoration Division has engaged their Regional Resource Coordinator (RRC) in Baton Rouge and various field and HQ staff in support of environmental assessment activities. NOAA, as a Trustee for natural resources that may be impacted as a result of the barge incident release is working in coordination with other State and Federal Trustees to conduct a Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA). The trustee team will identify, document and quantify injuries to natural resources and services, and determine appropriate restoration activities that will compensate the public for any loss of natural resources resulting from the spill.

Potential areas of consideration for Trustee assessment activities include Mississippi River surface waters and associated aquatic fauna, shoreline habitats such as wetlands, sand flats and sensitive barge habitat, birds, wildlife, and recreational impacts potentially associated with the release. The NOAA RRC in Louisiana is currently coordinating with Trustees in planning preassessment activities, and will travel on-scene later today or tomorrow to initiate field activities and to coordinate with the ongoing response.

Following the November 2000 M/V Westchester grounding incident that resulted in the release of 550,000 gallons of Nigerian crude oil at Mile Marker 38, Trustees quantified injuries to freshwater vegetative, delta marsh, rip rap and sand flat habitats, birds, wildlife and recreational services. The NRDA resulted in a series of marsh enhancement and recreational projects that were implemented to compensate the public (<http://www.darrp.noaa.gov/southeast/westchester/pdf/westdarpfnl.pdf>). Although the fate and effects of the oil from this release will vary from previous incidents, useful information about the type of assessment, type and duration of injuries, recovery rates and project types may be informative here.