

IMPACTS FROM VESSEL SPILLS

ACTION PLAN SUMMARY

GULF OF THE FARALLONES NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY

ISSUE STATEMENT

Vessel spills impact marine mammals, seabirds and other natural resources in and around Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary (GFNMS). All transiting vessels carry crude oil, bunker fuel, and/or other hazardous material, and therefore pose a risk. The sanctuary will enhance prevention of and improve response to cumulative and catastrophic spill events.

OUR GOAL

To minimize the risk to sanctuary natural marine resources from spills, while allowing for the continuation of safe, efficient, and environmentally sound transportation.



Photo: GFNMS

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Over 6,000 commercial vessels (excluding domestic fishing craft) enter and exit the San Francisco Bay every year. Just under 25% of the vessels are tankers of intermediate size and about 5% are large vessels. Other vessels that transit through the sanctuary include: container ships, bulk carriers, chemical carriers, military vessels, research vessels, cruise ships, and tugs.

Historically, the total number of spills from transiting vessels is small, but the potential impacts are enormous, given the number and volume of vessels and the hazardous cargo lane's proximity to the Farallon Islands and major seabird and marine mammal populations. Large commercial vessels (LCVs) are of particular concern for spills because they can carry up to 1 million gallons of bunker fuel, a heavy, viscous fluid similar to crude oil, which they use for fuel.

Due to the potential threat of vessel spills within the San Francisco Bay, the sanctuary's main objectives are to assess the level of risk from vessel traffic, and determine whether improvements can be made to reduce that risk and identify potential threats to species and habitats of concern.

THE JOINT MANAGEMENT PLAN REVIEW (JMPR)

Impacts from Vessel Spills is one of the action plans in the GFNMS Draft Management Plan (DMP). The DMP includes nine action plans that, once finalized, will guide sanctuary management for the next five years. The plan is a revision of the original management plan, developed when the sanctuary was designated in 1981, and is focused on how best to understand and protect the sanctuary's resources. The National Marine Sanctuary Program (NMSPP) is updating the management plans for Cordell Bank, Gulf of the Farallones, and Monterey Bay national marine sanctuaries in what is known as the Joint Management Plan Review.



GULF OF THE FARALLONES NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY

Designated in 1981, Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary spans 1,279-square-miles (966 square nautical miles) just north and west of San Francisco Bay, and protects open ocean, near-shore tidal flats, rocky intertidal areas, wetlands, subtidal reefs, and coastal beaches within its boundaries.

Food-rich sanctuary waters teem with life: fish, invertebrates, seabirds and marine mammals thrive here. The sanctuary contains thirty-six marine mammal species, as well as twenty-six federally listed endangered or threatened species. White sharks and endangered blue and humpback whales migrate here seasonally to feed, and the Farallon Islands host the largest concentration of breeding seabirds in the contiguous United States.



ACTION PLAN

The sanctuary's Impacts from Vessel Spills Action Plan was developed jointly with a variety of stakeholders and partners and includes, but is not limited to, the following components:

- Expand Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary (MBNMS) drift analysis model to include Point Arena and Mendocino.
- Refine oceanographic data used in existing spill and drift model to increase accuracy of risk assessments.
- Evaluate vessel activities in the sanctuary as a first step to assessing the risk of spills.
- Evaluate recent vessel routing changes related to MBNMS vessel traffic.
- Track distribution and numbers of species of special concern and habitats in relation to probable spill trajectories.
- Participate on Regional Response Team to address risks to sanctuary resources.
- Revise sanctuary in-house emergency response plan.
- Continue to improve integration of sanctuary Beach Watch and Ecosystem Dynamic Study (EDS) data into Area Contingency Plan.
- Conduct outreach to mariners to increase stewardship of the sanctuary, including voluntary compliance with Vessel Traffic Safety System and sanctuary regulations.
- Increase regular communication between sanctuary and maritime trade industry.
- Select a sanctuary representative to participate in regional forums addressing vessel traffic issues.
- Create a standing vessel spills working group to advise the sanctuary on implementation of proposed action plans.

TO GET INVOLVED

GFNMS welcomes your ideas about important resource management issues in the sanctuary. A Draft Management Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement are scheduled for release to the public in 2006. Following their release, hearings will be held in several locations throughout the region to gather public comment. Written comments will be accepted as well. To find out about public hearings, or how to submit written comments, please visit our website at <http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/jointplan>.