

Oil Spill Task Force

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Statement to the US Commission on Ocean Policy

This statement is submitted to the US Commission on Ocean Policy by the Pacific States/British Columbia Oil Spill Task Force. As our name implies, we are a body which focuses on oil spill prevention, preparedness, and response on the Pacific Coast. We suggest that the Task Force offers a model for regional cooperation, coordination, and collaboration which could be applied to a range of ocean governance issues.

The Pacific States/British Columbia Oil Spill Task Force exists pursuant to a Memorandum of Cooperation signed by the Governors of Alaska, Washington, Oregon, California, and Hawaii as well as the Premier of British Columbia. Those executives have charged the environmental agencies in their jurisdictions (which have regulatory authority to require that the private sector prevent, prepare for, and respond to oil spills) to coordinate on a regional basis, and appointed the directors of those agencies to serve as “Members” of the Task Force.

These Members meet annually to adopt workplans which implement five-year Strategic Plans. These Members also appoint program staff in charge of their agency’s oil spill program operations to meet with Task Force staff quarterly to ensure implementation of each task approved in the annual workplan. The expense associated with a Task Force staff person (who is hired through a contract administered by one member agency) is supported by interagency funding agreements. Staff ensures ongoing management of approved projects, keeps member agencies accountable to their commitments and agreements, and provides administrative support for the organization.

Not only are the annual meetings of the Task Force Members open to the public and rotated among member jurisdictions, but the Task Force also sponsors an annual topic-specific roundtable to foster public-private conversations on relevant issues of concern. In addition, key stakeholders – representing industry, environmental advocates, and state and federal agencies – are invited to participate in workgroups on projects which affect them. For example, the Task Force just completed a three-year project involving broad stakeholder participation in evaluating the risks associated with coastwise vessel traffic. This project workgroup made a number of consensus recommendations to the US and Canadian Coast Guards, to the Task Force, and to the private sector which will

reduce that risk and help prevent oil spills on the West Coast. In summary, we have top executive buy-in, cooperation at the operations level, committed funding for staff focused on ensuring coordination, and mechanisms for public participation and input.

The report "Oil in the Sea III" recently released by the National Academies' Ocean Studies Board and Marine Board states that natural seeps and petroleum consumption activities contribute more petroleum to the marine environment than transportation activities. Yet, as has once again been demonstrated by the oil spill off the coast of Spain, oil spills do have locally devastating effects when they occur. As with all areas of environmental protection, vigilance and continuous improvement are necessary. For this reason, the Task Force recommends two additional steps which should be taken at a national policy level in order to improve protection of our coasts and marine resources, as follows:

- Since petroleum carried in large amounts by cargo/passenger vessels as fuel can be spilled in groundings and collisions, the US Coast Guard should be given statutory authority to require oil spill contingency plans and contracted response capability from the operators of such vessels, just as it does from the operators of tank vessels which carry oil as cargo. We must be prepared to address oil spill risks posed by all vessels.
- The Oil Spill Liability Trust Fund, created by the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 to provide funding for oil spill response costs incurred by government, should be reactivated through a tax on gasoline and other petroleum products, and used for oil spill prevention projects and grants as well as for response costs. One such prevention project should be establishing dedicated rescue tugs around America's coastline, as is done in the UK, to help keep disabled vessels from grounding and spilling oil, thus providing protection for our environmentally and economically sensitive coasts.

We thank you for this opportunity to recommend actions which we believe will improve ocean policy coordination as well as marine resource protection.

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