

Extended Abstract

The Wildlife Facility as a Functional Element of an Oil Spill Exercise

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Abstract: Exercises ensure that responders understand pre-established plans and build working relationships prior to an actual incident. They may also involve practicing functional elements, such as deploying spill clean-up equipment and practicing shoreline assessment skills. Command post exercises can help familiarize agency and industry with the role of a qualified wildlife responder, but most agency- and industry-led exercises do not involve wildlife as a functional element. This paper addresses a unique opportunity to implement the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services (NH DES) Contingency Plan for Oiled Wildlife by establishing a temporary oiled wildlife facility in a pre-identified location. As a part of the 2009 Piscataqua River Co-op Exercise, Tri-State Bird Rescue & Research, Inc. (Tri-State) worked with NH DES and Public Service of New Hampshire (PSNH) to establish a temporary oiled wildlife facility using the wildlife stockpile maintained by NH DES. A major component of the functional exercise was to allow industry and agency partners to tour the temporary facility in order to better understand the complex and unique needs of an oiled wildlife response.

Introduction

Oil spill exercises are an important tool for practicing and improving contingency plans as well as building relationships within the response community. In the United States the National Preparedness for Response Exercise Program (PREP) Guidelines describe exercise development for government oil pollution contingency plan holders. Many industry plan holders have also elected to follow these guidelines

[http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/uscg/prep_gid.pdf]. Exercises practice a specific component of a facility, vessel or area response plan, such as notifications or equipment deployment. Area Exercises validate Area Contingency Plans and bring together both government and industry responders throughout a designated geographic area. Although wildlife response is not specifically addressed in the PREP guidelines, many plan holders choose to incorporate oiled wildlife into their exercises.

Ways of addressing oiled wildlife during an exercise range from telephone notification of the Qualified Wildlife Responder (QWR) to on-scene participation in a command post exercise. Involvement in exercises allows the QWR to better understand wildlife concerns in a specific area. In addition, participation provides an opportunity to educate agency and industry partners who are often unfamiliar with the intricacies of a wildlife response.

Telephone notifications to the QWR allow for detailed discussion about the scenario and can lead to open a discussion of the appropriate path forward. However, telephone conversations may limit the extent to which the wildlife response is played during a drill. When a wildlife response is a major element of an exercise, it is often beneficial to have a QWR present at the command post. A QWR on-scene may assist natural resource trustees in writing wildlife plans, respond to wildlife injects and introduce response colleagues to various aspects of oiled wildlife response determined by the exercise scenario. Many exercises involve a functional component, such as deploying oil spill clean-up equipment, but oiled wildlife response equipment or facilities are seldom tested.

New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services (NH DES) and Tri-State Bird Rescue & Research, Inc. (Tri-State) have been working together through a contract process since 1996 to develop and maintain a contingency plan for oiled wildlife. In accordance with the plan Tri-State has assisted NH DES in planning and procuring a stockpile of equipment specific to oiled wildlife response, and has identified facilities near the NH seacoast which may be used as temporary oiled wildlife rehabilitation facilities. The Piscataqua River Co-op, the local oil spill response mutual aid organization, presents an annual Area Exercise to fulfill PREP requirements. As part of the 2009 exercise, NH DES and Tri-State created a functional component that exercised the contingency plan, stockpile and one pre-identified facility.

Planning

NH DES and Tri-State determined three goals for the functional exercise:

1. Test the usability and adaptability of one of the five pre-identified facilities in New Hampshire
2. Check equipment and supplies in New Hampshire's oiled wildlife stockpile
3. Provide an opportunity for agency and industry colleagues to experience a temporary oiled wildlife rehabilitation facility.

Each element required some planning to ensure its success.

The pre-identified facility chosen was a warehouse at Public Service of New Hampshire (PSNH) Newington Station. PSNH, a member of the Piscataqua River Co-op and an important participant in planning the Area Exercise, agreed to make the warehouse available during the week of the exercise for set-up and tours. The Newington Station campus is a secure facility, so PSNH also arranged access for Area Exercise participants who wished to tour the warehouse after set-up. Tri-State had previously completed and maintained a facility plan, including a floor plan, site safety information and contact numbers, and Tri-State representatives visited the warehouse one month prior to the exercise to photograph additional details of infrastructure and space.

Using the photographs and a floor plan sketch, Tri-State developed a layout of functional areas. The functional areas included:

- Logistics and safety
- Field

- Medical intake
- Personnel decontamination
- Oiled animal housing
- Cleaning (wash and rinse)
- Drying
- Indoor clean animal housing
- Outdoor clean animal housing
- Release examination
- Animal food preparation
- Evidence / morgue
- Volunteer break area

Many considerations for the placement of each functional area were examined to create the temporary wildlife facility. Tri-State looked closely at the existing facility plans in relationship to the infrastructure requirements, the ability to separate contaminated and uncontaminated areas and flow patterns for personnel and the animal caseload. For example, the animal food preparation area requires specific utility needs, space for people, areas to separate contaminated and uncontaminated items and a systematic flow pattern. Some basic examples of needs to establish a suitable food preparation area include: clean running water, electricity to run appliances and space for tables. Generally this area is an uncontaminated area where personal protective equipment requirements are reduced, but dishes from both cleaned and contaminated animal pens will need to be washed and prepared for feedings. Hence, the animal food preparation area should be accessible to the personnel decontamination so workers coming from contaminated animal pens can pass through this area. This space also needs accessibility from the clean animal pens, so that workers caring for cleaned animals do not need to go through contaminated areas.

Detailed lists were developed of actual supplies and equipment required for each functional area during a response. NH DES arranged for the oiled wildlife trailer to be on-site the day before the exercise. The wildlife trailer holds a stockpile that consists of a variety of supplies and equipment necessary for the initial days of an oiled wildlife response, including two on-demand propane hot water heaters. Since checking the state's oiled wildlife equipment was included in the project goals, a professional plumber was engaged to safely install and vent hot water heaters.

After cross-referencing the supplies and equipment lists for each of functional areas with the NH DES stockpile, Tri-State identified additional items that would be needed. Even a well-supplied stockpile can not provide for every contingency, and perishable supplies must always be purchased at the time of an incident. However, in order to demonstrate to response colleagues the space, personnel, equipment and supplies needed to run an oiled wildlife facility *and* refrain from purchasing items not intended for the stockpile, detailed preparation and some imagination were required.

Tri-State brought some additional equipment and used improvised representations of the remaining items that would ordinarily be purchased during a response. For example, instead of buying lumber and constructing pens for oiled and cleaned animal housing, duct

tape was used to mark the space on the floor. This would give tour participants an idea of the large amount of space required for animal housing.

Tri-State also selected photographs from actual oiled wildlife responses to accompany each functional area. The photographs demonstrated a variety of solutions that met the needs of each area, and they showed the scale and activity of a large response.

The Exercise

The temporary oiled wildlife rehabilitation facility portion of the Area Exercise occurred on two consecutive days. On the first day, Tri-State worked with NH DES and PSNH to set up the facility. On the second day, Tri-State personnel presented the facility to agency and industry colleagues.

Initial set-up consisted of unloading the stockpile and additional supplies brought by Tri-State. The items were separated into their respective functional areas, as designated by the pre-planning list. After unpacking the items three Tri-State staff members began assembling them within each area. Setting up each functional area for the exercise was similar to facility set-up during an incident, but it added the element of effective visual demonstration. Careful placement of the items invited discussion with visitors about the use of the space and equipment. For example, the release examination area included a scale, supplies for drawing blood and reading blood values, several sizes of USFWS bands and one decoy bird “patient” partially covered by a towel.

In the event of an actual response PSNH would empty the warehouse, but for the exercise many stored items were not removed. PSNH allowed Tri-State to use a variety of stored objects to help represent pens and large equipment; a chest freezer in the evidence / morgue area was created by covering three trash barrels in butcher paper and affixing a padlock with duct tape.

In order to achieve the goal of providing agency and industry colleagues with the opportunity to experience a temporary oiled wildlife facility, Tri-State used a variety of devices to simulate the feeling of an actual response for the tour participants. Plush animals and decoys were used throughout the facility to represent oiled and cleaned animals in each stage of the rehabilitation process. A variety of toy and candy fish, worms, insects and other “food items” were displayed in the animal food preparation area. Documentation such as medical records and field observation sheets were filled out to describe a believable scenario. The collections of photographs provided a connection between the static items in the exercise facility and their use during an actual incident.

Most importantly, the oiled wildlife facility was shared through personal contact with response colleagues. NH DES invited Tri-State to make a presentation during the training portion of the Piscataqua River Co-op Exercise, introducing participants to the elements of oiled wildlife response and inviting them to tour the oiled wildlife facility following the command post exercise.

About 30 agency and industry partners visited the wildlife facility, which was located just a few minutes drive from the command post exercise. One Tri-State staff member greeted them and invited them to explore the facility. A second staff member guided tours for those who preferred a more structured look. While examining each functional area, the visitors asked a variety of questions about the rehabilitation process. They also discussed potential oiled wildlife risks in their own areas of responsibility with Tri-State staff and with each other. The active participation enhanced relationship building for agency and industry colleagues and helped them better understand the complex process of oiled wildlife response.

Conclusion

The temporary oiled wildlife facility functional element of the 2009 Piscataqua River Co-op Exercise was successful because of extensive, detailed preparation. The project effectively exercised the pre-identified warehouse at PSNH as well as the NH DES oiled wildlife stockpile. In addition it provided an opportunity for industry and agency planners and responders to examine and discuss a temporary oiled wildlife facility outside of an actual incident.

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