

As BP receives new contracts for Gulf Coast

## Oil spill threatens Houston-area wildlife

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Twenty-five years ago, the oil tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground in Alaska's Prince William Sound, spilling over 10 million gallons of oil—by some independent estimates, as many as 32 million gallons—and devastating the local environment. Two developments within a week of the anniversary make clear that neither the industry nor the government has done anything to alter their reckless and criminal practices over the intervening quarter-century.

Saturday afternoon, two days before the 25th anniversary of the Exxon Valdez oil spill, a collision involving an oil barge off the coast of Texas released up to 168,000 gallons of thick fuel oil near ecologically fragile wetlands. The spill occurred just south of the Port of Houston in Galveston Bay, in a heavily used shipping channel linking the port to the Gulf of Mexico. Traffic along the channel, the only means for larger, deep draft vessels to reach the port, was closed completely until yesterday morning, when the Coast Guard began allowing limited movement, while still prohibiting ships from entering or exiting the waterway. As of this writing, over a hundred ships remain stranded, waiting to enter or exit the channel.

The barge and its tug *Miss Susan*, both owned by Kirby Inland Marine, struck the 585-foot-long *Summer Wind* bulk carrier at the "Texas City Y" section of the waterway, puncturing one of the barge's oil tanks and emptying virtually its entire contents into the surrounding water. Two workers were reportedly sent to the hospital after inhaling toxic gas released by the spill. Authorities responded by closing the channel, siphoning off as much oil as possible, deploying two dozen skimming vessels, and laying over 90,000 feet of floating boom to contain the spill. Tide, current, and wind conditions, however, made containment effectively impossible, and oil began washing up on

nearby shores.

The collision occurred in almost the exact same spot as a previous collision a week earlier, also involving a Kirby Inland Marine owned oil barge, and a rice tanker. Although no oil was leaked in the earlier incident, the collision was violent enough to leave a huge gash above the tanker's waterline, and significant environmental damage was apparently a real possibility, as safety officials credited the avoidance of a "major environmental incident" to the "quick response of our maritime safety professionals." The *Miss Susan* tugboat in particular has been involved in 18 incidents and accidents over the past decade, including six collisions, according to Coast Guard records.

The spill is expected to wreak havoc on the surrounding ecosystem, in particular the dwindling and vulnerable salt marshes, at a time of the year when hundreds of thousands of migratory shorebirds pass through the area. At the nearby Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary, which hosts between 50,000 and 70,000 migratory birds a year from 100 different species, workers have found at least 50 oiled birds so far, and have cautioned that the final count will likely be far higher. Salt marshes will continue to dwindle as contact with the thick, persistent fuel oil kills off the plants whose roots hold the soil together.

The Houston Ship Channel had been closed by authorities to prevent obstruction of the cleanup effort. However, the Coast Guard is eager to reopen the Channel as quickly as possible, as it is estimated that a closure of the channel, through which as many as a hundred ships pass daily, costs the area as much as \$330 million in lost revenue per day. In particular, there is concern that prolonged closure of the channel could negatively impact the Houston area's numerous

refineries, which together account for 10 percent of capacity for the entire country and are a huge component of the city's economy.

The political and media establishment have, predictably, begun to respond to the disaster with an unabashed whitewash campaign. At pains to emphasize the supposedly small scope of the spill, news outlets have repeatedly compared the spill favorably to the larger Exxon Valdez and Deepwater Horizon spills. Nationally, however, the story has barely registered at all. Jerry Patterson, commissioner of Texas' General Land Office, the main state agency tasked with handling oil spills, told the press, "This spill—I think if we keep our fingers crossed—is not going to have the negative impact that it could have had." The Houston Audubon Society, however, was far less optimistic, telling the press point-blank, "We expect this to get much worse."

Elsewhere in the Gulf of Mexico, on Wednesday the BP oil company won bids for 24 tracts worth \$41.6 million in its first federal lease sale since the EPA lifted its yearlong ban on the company competing for new federal contracts the week before. Although the ban had little financial impact on the company (lost revenue is estimated at about \$600 million for a company that made \$23 billion in profit last year), and although BP came in fifth in terms of the value of its bids, its participation in the lease sale is being widely touted as a turning point in BP's fortunes after perpetrating the worst environmental disaster in American history with the Deepwater Horizon spill in 2010. An industry commentator interviewed by the *New York Times* was ecstatic: "They have been in the penalty box. ... They have been working hard to lift the sanctions, and they immediately turned that into something positive."

Although BP's offshore drilling business in the Gulf of Mexico has suffered in the aftermath of the 2010 spill, the Obama administration has from the start been determined to shield the company from as much liability as possible. It systematically covered up the extent of the spill while the oil was still flowing into the Gulf and forced claimants who had their livelihoods devastated by the spill to sign away their right to sue in exchange for paltry sums through the Gulf Coast Claims Facility. BP and top executives were shielded from prosecution and the full extent of the fines for which they were liable, while authorities assumed a

fraudulent public face of holding the company to account. Now, four years later, the administration is clearly signaling that BP is to be fully rehabilitated and allowed to continue its criminally reckless practices in the Gulf without restraint.



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