



4/27/2006

## **Update: Oil Slick in the Upper Delaware Bay April 25, 2006**

An oil slick was discovered in the upper Delaware Bay on the morning of April 25, 2006. The Coast Guard and NJDEP and DENREC from the State of Delaware were on the water placing booms on tributaries and around the slick, which was reported to be six miles long. The slick was a narrow band that was moving towards the New Jersey shore until later in the day when the wind moved it toward Delaware. The same day NJDEP Commissioner Lisa Jackson ordered 110 square miles (70,4000 acres) of New Jersey shellfish beds closed to harvesting to protect the public from potentially polluted shellfish, primarily oysters.

Oil skimming vessels were working to contain and clean up the oil each day with a projected completion by the end of the week. The Coast Guard issued a report on the incident but no source of the oil has been pinpointed as of April 27; investigations continue. Illegal bilge dumping is suspected. The incident has been “federalized” since the responsible party has not yet been identified; this allows for the release of funds from the Oil Spill Liability Act to be used for clean up operations.

Delaware Riverkeeper Network (DRN) citizen action coordinator Faith Zerbe deployed a number of volunteers to investigate, conduct visual inspections, observe wildlife and report oiling on the New Jersey and Delaware shorelines, wetlands, and tributaries. It was noted on Wednesday by DRN that while booms were in place at the mouth of several larger tributaries in New Jersey, many smaller tributaries were not protected. No wildlife impacts have yet been noted.

DRN has relayed field reports and the condition and presence or lack of presence of booms to the appropriate agencies, including the Coast Guard and the Natural Resource Damage Assessment specialists from NJDEP.

As Fred Stine, DRN estuary coordinator, observed in an article in the Philadelphia Inquirer April 26, “Everything is coming back to life in the spring. It is particularly damaging this time of year because there is so much nursery life—so many babies of all different species around”, including fish, mammals, and birds.

Stine also notes in his staff report:

Illegal discharges of bilge water into the Bay and River is a very large and on-going problem; we are probably discovering only a minority of the spills that occur. Stine spoke with Dr. Jonathan Sharp, professor of Oceanography, University of Delaware, Graduate College of Marine Studies on April 26. Sharp told Stine that, based upon the post-spill assessment of the catastrophic Athos I oil spill in 2004, there is very little if any research on the specific cumulative impacts of oil spills on the Delaware Estuary. The cumulative impacts of the

known and unknown spills and runoff from the refineries and urban areas are a major concern. According to Sharp, there is a link between the amount of PAHs from petroleum contamination in the estuary and the susceptibility of the Delaware Estuary shellfish to bacteria, such as MX. Sharp stated that impacts from MX to the Delaware shellfish beds began earlier and were more severe than in those in the Chesapeake because there is so much more petroleum coming up the Delaware (to refineries, etc.). PAH contamination has placed the Delaware's shellfish beds at greater risk.

Stine also reported that on April 26 the Delaware Petroleum Consortium's oil skimmers were not participating in the clean up; they were sitting at the dock and should have been mobilized. Stine also noted that a greater sense of urgency and targeted resources should be dedicated to "fingerprinting" spilled product such as this type of oil slick in an effort to identify the responsible party more quickly.

Stine reports that many times during spills, the lead agency will attempt to downplay the impacts, claiming that a certain percentage of the product will evaporate. But Stine points out that evaporation does not eliminate all the oil. The residual product left behind is a significant, possibly toxic, problem left in the water column.

As reports from DRN volunteers are received, they are relayed to the agencies and will be posted on DRN's website.