



At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

The purpose of this review was to determine what actions the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) took to communicate oil spill risk to affected communities near the Gulf of Mexico and Michigan's Kalamazoo River.

Background

When a major oil spill occurs in the United States, coordinated teams of local, state, and national personnel are called upon to help contain the spill, clean it up, and ensure that damage to human health and the environment is minimized. EPA's emergency response played an integral role in two recent oil spills. On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon mobile offshore drilling unit exploded, resulting in an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, known as the BP oil spill. On July 26, 2010, the Enbridge oil spill occurred, releasing oil into Michigan's Kalamazoo River.

For further information, contact our Office of Congressional, Public Affairs and Management at (202) 566-2391.

The full report is at:
www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2011/20110623-11-P-0273.pdf

EPA Actively Evaluating Effectiveness of Its BP and Enbridge Oil Spill Response Communications

What We Found

We concluded that EPA is actively evaluating the effectiveness of its spill response communications activities. Because we found that the Agency has several ongoing efforts focused on lessons-learned activities, we did not continue into a field work phase of this assignment to evaluate the effectiveness of the Agency's communication efforts. We are closing this assignment upon issuing this report.

The results and the interpretation of all data collected by EPA at the BP and Enbridge oil spills were shared with state and local decisionmakers, as well as the impacted communities, in a number of ways. EPA developed Quality Assurance Sampling Plans to collect further data on the chemical contamination in air, water, and sediments. EPA communicated with the general public via press conferences, fact sheets, community meetings, and the Internet and social networking media. Data results and interpretations were posted on the Internet. The results were also communicated to local and state decisionmakers to inform their decisions on actions such as voluntary evacuations and drinking water advisories to protect public health. In addition, EPA issued a request for proposals for grants totaling up to \$300,000 to further communication efforts in the environmental-justice-designated communities impacted by the BP oil spill. EPA's response communications assisted states and other federal agencies in understanding the immediate and long-term impacts of oil contamination.

EPA is completing lessons-learned exercises to evaluate the effectiveness of its response to both oil spill incidents. These retrospective reviews address, in part, the effectiveness of EPA's communication strategy and activities. The lessons-learned activities will allow the Agency to identify areas of success, as well as areas that could be improved upon in responding to future emergency situations.

We make no recommendations in this report, and the Agency did not formally respond to a draft version of this report. A representative of EPA's Office of Emergency Response did state that the report was a good summary of spill response, coordination, and followup actions.