



At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

Representative Heath Shuler requested that we investigate the events surrounding a response to an April 25, 2009, telephone report of a leaking well in Skyland, North Carolina. We conducted this review to determine whether the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) receipt and disposition of that telephone call followed applicable policies and procedures.

Background

The National Response Center (NRC), operated by the U.S. Coast Guard, Department of Homeland Security, is the sole national point of contact for reporting all oil, chemical, radiological, and biological discharges into the environment. During non-business hours, the EPA emergency hotline is programmed to forward all incoming calls to the NRC phone system, which is staffed at all times.

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

To view the full report, click on the following link:
www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2010/20091110-10-P-0027.pdf

Congressionally Requested Inquiry into EPA's Response to a Report of a Leaking Well in North Carolina and the National Response Center Hotline

What We Found

We found that EPA staff did not receive any calls or voicemail messages on April 25, 2009, from the Skyland, North Carolina, constituent about a leaking well. However, when the Agency was informed of the leak by a local news reporter, EPA's On-Scene Coordinator contacted the constituent and the constituent's neighbors. The On-Scene Coordinator then arranged for permanent repairs to the well, which were completed April 28, 2009.

We found that NRC did receive voicemails about the leaking well. On April 25, 2009, two other callers reported separate environmental emergencies by voicemail. The NRC Operations Officer informed us NRC did not listen to the voicemails until September 2009. We confirmed that NRC did not provide any response to these voicemails. Once the voicemails were discovered, NRC staff took no actions to inform EPA that callers had been channeled into a voicemail system.

Prior to April 25, 2009, we determined that 12 voicemails were left with NRC. The earliest of these voicemails was dated October 12, 2006. We have found inconsistencies in the statements of NRC and NRC telephone contractors regarding who within NRC may have been aware of the voicemail problem and when.

We will present our findings to the Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General so it may determine the degree to which the telephone contractors have repaired the NRC phone system and to fully investigate the inconsistencies in information provided by NRC staff and telephone contractors.