

Mississippi Field Office Helps Out With BP Oil Spill

Article by Terri Jacobson, Mississippi Ecological Services Field Office

On April 20, 2010, BP's Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico. Since that dreadful event, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Ecological Service field office in Jackson has worked to ensure protection of the fish and wildlife resources of Mississippi. In the office, biologists reviewed initial response efforts to save sensitive and threatened and endangered species, along with their coastal habitats. As the one-year anniversary approaches, we are still responding to oil-spill-related issues and are now reviewing habitat restoration and monitoring projects.

In addition, nine staff members from the field office volunteered to leave the comforts of home and drive down to the coast to work on oil-spill details in 2010 and 2011. We had two staff members who ended up volunteering for a total of three details each, and one volunteer who was on detail for four weeks straight, plus another who worked a total of seven weeks. Each employee left for the unknown, worked very long days, and returned with stories and lessons learned.

Three staff members went to work at the oil spill incident command centers. With his military background and strong organizational skills, our field office supervisor, Stephen Ricks spent two details on strategic planning and coordination. Our GIS expert, Ryan Theel, created maps and electronic data bases while Connie Dickard worked on the public relations aspect of the oil spill.

Paul Necaie, coastal biologist, worked for four weeks primarily at the Grand Bay National Wildlife Refuge, but he also spent some time at Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge. Paul helped the refuges prepare oil spill response plans and do field surveys on foot, ATV, and boat, searching for oil along the waters and shorelines of the refuges. Paul also assisted law enforcement personnel in response and recovery of stranded sea turtles.

Three biologists, Daniel Gregg, David Felder, and Terri Jacobson, all worked two-week details looking for oiled animals and counting shorebirds on the coastal beaches and barrier islands for the Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA). NRDA is a review and restoration process mandated by federal law following environmental disasters. Once the damage is assessed and quantified, the owner(s) of the leaking oil well, and any other responsible party, must pay to fix the damage.

Biologists, Sandie Kilpatrick and Randy Browning were Resource Advisors (READs) who worked on the National Park Service lands of the Gulf Islands National Seashore. Their job was to ensure that cleanup teams stayed out of sensitive or protected areas, such as bird or sea turtle nesting sites, and not damage any resources above and beyond what the oil spill did. After working two details, Sandie was designated a lead READ and went back to the coast to help train other READs this past winter.

Although the staff of the Mississippi Ecological Service field office was saddened by the oil spill we are honored to contribute our expertise and time for safeguarding the future of our coastal resources.



Rescuing an oiled brown pelican.
Photo credit: David Felder, USFWS



Biologist Terri Jacobson (right) photographs an avian carcass on a NRDA survey.
Photo credit: USFWS



An oiled Kemp Ridely sea turtle is rescued.
Photo credit: David Felder, USFWS



Biologist Paul Necaie points to oil on beach.
Photo Courtesy of Press-Register Staff Photographer Kate Mercer