

*On March 22, 2014, a bulk carrier moving through the Houston (TX) ship channel collided with a barge carrying oil, which resulted in approximately 168,000 gallons of marine fuel oil being released into Galveston Bay and dispersing into the Gulf of Mexico.*

A significant amount of oil from the spill drifted approximately 150 miles south making landfall on Matagorda Island (Matagorda), a unit of the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and winter home to the only naturally wild flock of whooping cranes in existence. When the spill occurred, approximately 70% of the estimated 304 whooping cranes had not yet begun their migration to Wood-Buffalo National Park in Canada. Of the birds that remained, Service biologists estimated 40-60 were on Matagorda Island.

Prior to the spill reaching Matagorda, the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge sent teams of Service employees to assess conditions and establish a baseline on the Gulf side of the island. Matagorda is part of a barrier island chain that extends along most of the Texas shoreline. In addition to wintering whooping cranes, the island also has 11 pairs of nesting aplomado falcons, a resident bird that was extirpated from the United States in the 1950s and is being successfully reintroduced. Kemp's Ridley sea turtles are currently staging in the Gulf and are expected to begin nesting on area beaches, the most northern extent of their historic range. The barrier islands along the Texas coast are important for many other migratory birds, including piping plover and shorebirds that feed on the sandy beaches and roost in the vegetation of the foredune. The bay system behind Matagorda is made up of estuarine flats, tidal flats, and sea grass beds that support shell fish, sport fish, wintering waterfowl, sea turtles and more.

The oil that reached Matagorda did not disperse further into the bay system, but it did impact approximately 25 miles on the Gulf side of the 38-mile island. Of that, 4.3 miles received significant coverage, up to 70 %. Two days after the oil reached the island, wind and wave activity buried the majority of the heavy black oil under 0.5 to 4 inches of sand. Intermittently spread along the shoreline, the oil consists of everything from tar balls and mats, to a viscous and tacky black mass that, three weeks after impact, still softens under the heat of the sun. The oil is within the intertidal zone and extends 30 yards up into the vegetation within the wrack line.

Challenges for the cleanup operation include limited access to Matagorda, extremely remote conditions, and the protection of natural resources. The 38-mile island has two access points, one on each end. As responders have worked tirelessly to effectively clean up the beaches and other areas impacted by the oil spill, they have been challenged by high tides, changing weather, and the distances required for travel to Matagorda's access points (both from the mainland and also while on the island). Operations currently include task forces using manual labor and light mechanical equipment to remove the oily waste. Workers shovel the oiled materials into piles, and front-end loaders retrieve the piles and dump them directly into dump trucks to be taken to a waste disposal site off the island.

As of April 14, 2014, 1,892,900 pounds of oiled sand had been removed. At its peak, the response has had 520 staff, 103 UTVs, 104 dump trucks, 15 skid steer loaders, three helicopters, and 31 boats. A total of 187 deceased animals have been collected on Matagorda. Tests will be conducted to ascertain cause of death.

A total of 90 miles of shoreline were impacted by oil that drifted south. In addition to Matagorda Island, privately-owned San Jose Island, Mustang Island State Park, and the North Padre Island National Seashore were also impacted.

The incident response is being led by a unified command with the Coast Guard serving as the lead agency. The Service is represented on the Unified Command, along with many local, state and federal agencies including representatives from Texas General Land Office, Texas Parks and Wildlife, NOAA, and National Marine Fisheries.

Service personnel from Texas refuges, the ES Texas Coastal Field Office and the Office of Law Enforcement, with support from the Regional Office, have worked tirelessly to respond to the spill in an effort to protect impacted wildlife and habitat. Region 2 responders have been involved in many important roles covering logistics, operations, wildlife recovery, monitoring and more. DOI NRDA staff are coordinating and working closely with the State of Texas Trustee agencies and NOAA – as well as the Service’s mid-coast and Aransas National Wildlife Refuge staff -- to complete NRDA surveys.