

The NewsRoom

Release: # 3749

Date: November 7, 2007

Minerals Management Service Conducts 250th Unannounced Oil Spill Drill in the Gulf of Mexico***Offshore Operators' Oil Spill Response Plans Are Tested***

NEW ORLEANS – The Minerals Management Service (MMS) recently conducted its 250th drill to test oil spill response as part of its Unannounced Drill Program. The surprise drill, which took place October 16, 2007, tested offshore operator Shell Exploration and Production Company (Shell) and their ability to deal with an oil spill should one occur.

"MMS uses these drills to test the operators' Oil Spill Response Plans," explained Lars Herbst, Gulf of Mexico regional director. "Oil and gas operators have excellent safety and environmental records in the Gulf. Response plans are seldom called into action, but MMS wants to be sure the operators are able to respond quickly and effectively to an event if necessary."

The 250th unannounced drill began with an early morning call to Shell's URSA platform in the Gulf of Mexico informing the crew that an oil spill drill was being initiated. As part of the simulated incident, MMS required the deployment of aircraft to disperse the mock oil spill.

Once the drill was initiated, Shell immediately set-up an Incident Command Post according to the National Incident Management System as required by the U.S. Coast Guard, which oversees all response activities. This management system mandates how response efforts are coordinated for all oil spill incidents in the United States.

As part of the drill, which Shell performed satisfactorily, all activities were observed and monitored by both MMS staff and a representative of the U.S. Coast Guard who served as the Federal On-Scene Coordinator. MMS documents the operator's response time and ability to acquire the needed resources to respond.

All offshore operators are required to have a company under contract to handle any oil spill that may occur. Once the drill began, Shell staff contacted its oil spill response contractor, Marine Spill Response Corporation (MSRC). MSRC deployed its C-130 aircraft from Arizona to fly to Stennis International Airport in Mississippi where it underwent an annual MMS equipment inspection and received additional instructions as part of the exercise. A Beechcraft-90 airplane was also deployed to assist in the drill.

MSRC also alerted the crew of the Louisiana Responder, one of five oil spill response vessels that are maintained along the Gulf Coast. Docked in the Mississippi River at Fort Jackson, La., the vessel is capable of skimming oil from the surface of the water, and storing 4,000 barrels of recovered oil onboard. While

the vessel was not deployed as part of the drill, the time required for the responder crew to reach the vessel was measured, and fell within acceptable response levels.

At the conclusion of the drill's activities, staffs from MMS and Shell evaluated the drill activities and participants' responses with the Coast Guard's on-scene coordinator. A major benefit of the drill program is this evaluation process, through which MMS, the USCG, and operators calculate the lessons learned including what works well and what would benefit from improvement. An operator must meet all plan elements tested in order to successfully pass the drill.

MMS initiated the Unannounced Drill Program in 1989 and conducts approximately 20 drills each year. A drill may consist of a table top exercise or the actual deployment of specific response equipment such as oil spill response vessels or dispersant aircraft. Every drill tests two components: an operator's ability to notify the appropriate contacts including federal regulatory agencies, affected state and local agencies, internal response coordinators and response contractors, and an operator's ability to make the decisions, respond properly, and take appropriate action.

"The drill program has improved incident response across the board," commented Rusty Wright, MMS Gulf Region oil spill program administrator. "These drills have improved the operators' response times and their effective use of the plans as well."

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