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Prepared by the Pinellas County Communications Department and approved by the U.S. Coast Guard Sector St. Petersburg.

Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill FAQs

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General:

Has oil reached Pinellas County?

No. There have been no oil impacts from the Deepwater Horizon spill on Pinellas County beaches or shoreline. There have been several reported sightings of oil, but U.S. Coast Guard analysis determined the material was either organic (such as seaweed or algae) or not related to the Deepwater Horizon spill.

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Will oil come to Pinellas County?

According to Bill Conner, Chief of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Emergency Response Division, "The threat of any remaining surface oil reaching the shoreline of western Florida [including Pinellas County] is essentially zero." Recent overflights and satellite imagery, gathered since the Deepwater Horizon well has been capped, show that oil on the surface of the Gulf continues to naturally degrade and disperse. Only scattered patches of light sheen and weathered tarballs remain.

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Who is in charge?

The following chain of command structure has been used for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill response:

- Overall, the response is coordinated by the Unified Area Command in Louisiana, headed by the National Incident Commander Thad Allen and comprised of representatives of BP, state agencies and federal agencies.
- In Florida, the response is being led by the Florida Peninsula Command Post in Miami with representatives from the U.S. Coast Guard, Florida Department of Environmental Protection and BP. The exception is the Florida Panhandle counties—from Escambia to Jefferson—which are handled by Unified Command Sector Mobile in Alabama.
- For Pinellas County and the other west coast counties—from Taylor to Collier—the response has been coordinated by the U.S. Coast Guard Sector St. Petersburg which operates as a branch of the Florida Peninsula Command Post.
- Pinellas County emergency planners and officials will continue to work closely with the U.S. Coast Guard and partner agencies to monitor the situation.

At this time, operations in the Florida peninsula are downsizing due to the low threat of impact. The local contact for Pinellas County will continue to be the U.S. Coast Guard.

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Who is going to pay for this?

The responsible party, BP, would pay all costs incurred in preventing oil landfall or cleaning up oil residue if oil ever hits Pinellas County.

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How can I help? I want to volunteer.

Visit the [list of volunteer opportunities for Pinellas County](#) to sign up for activities such as coastal watches, preventive beach cleanups, wildlife monitoring and assistance at local wildlife rehabilitation agencies. Volunteers will not engage in any activity involving direct contact with oil-contaminated materials due to health and safety concerns. Another way to help is by inviting out-of-town family and friends to visit since many would-be tourists have canceled plans to visit Florida.

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How can I get a job (or training) related to the oil spill?

Because no oil has impacted the Florida Peninsula, there has been no need to activate the [Qualified Community Responders Program](#) in Pinellas County to offer job training for cleaning oiled beaches or wildlife. There are some limited job opportunities in the Florida Panhandle area. See [Florida Gulf Recovery Jobs](#), or call (877) 362-5034.

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How can I register my boat for the Vessels of Opportunity program?

Because no oil has impacted the Florida Peninsula, there has been no need to activate a Vessels of Opportunity program in Pinellas County.

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If oil comes here, will it be a heavy slick of oil as seen in Louisiana?

No. The oil would be highly weathered after traveling hundreds of miles and would likely be in the form of tar balls, mats or mousse, or a light oil sheen in the water. Although weathered material is not as toxic as fresh oil, it could still affect birds and other wildlife coming in contact with the material.

- **Tar balls** are sticky fragments of weathered oil that look similar to asphalt lumps. They range in size from a pinhead to 1 foot in diameter.
- **Tar mats** are an oil configuration that varies in color and shape. A mat might be formed from numerous tar balls or a patch of oily debris.
- **Tar mousse** is a pudding-like oil/water mixture that can be brown, rust or orange in color.
- **Oil sheen** is a very thin layer (less than .0002 inches) of floating oil that may be nearly transparent or varied in color.

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What if I find a tar ball?

Don't pick up a tar ball. Direct contact with oil should be avoided. For most people, an occasional brief contact with a small amount of oil will do no harm. However, some people are especially sensitive to chemicals, including the hydrocarbons found in petroleum products. They may have an allergic reaction or develop rashes. See [Deepwater Horizon Health Information Frequently Asked Questions](#). If you see what appears to be a tar ball, report it by calling (800) 424-8802 for the National Response Center or dial #DEP on a cell phone for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. For more information, view the [What If I Find a Tar Ball?](#) flyer.

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What happens if there is a hurricane?

High winds and seas from a hurricane may mix and "weather" the oil which can help accelerate the biodegradation process. However, high winds from a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico could also carry offshore oil to the Pinellas County shores. Storm surges could carry oil into the coastline and inland as far as the surge reaches. The movement of oil would depend on the track of the hurricane. See [Hurricanes and the Oil Spill](#).

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Will the beaches be closed?

The decision to close a beach would be made by the local jurisdiction. However, it is unlikely that Pinellas County beaches would be closed if oil came ashore. Oil in the water or on the beach poses little risk to the health of the general public if people remain out of the water. The beaches would likely remain open, but the water would be posted as off limits. If there were a visible presence of oil sheen in the water or tar balls washing up on the beaches, the Pinellas County Department of Health would issue public health advisories urging citizens not to enter the water.

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Pinellas County Preparations:

What action is Pinellas County taking to prepare?

Pinellas County officials and staff are:

- monitoring the situation daily
- updating tactical plans
- securing environmental baseline data
- assisting with volunteer recruitment
- keeping residents informed through news releases and Web updates
- reviewing environmental options
- assisting local businesses with claims and loans
- promoting tourism

Sally Bishop, director of Pinellas County Emergency Management, provided an update on the county's role in preparing for potential impacts of the oil spill at the June 15, 2010, Board of County Commissioners meeting. Click here for the [news summary](#), or [watch a video](#) of the briefing (20-minute video with closed captioning).

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How is Pinellas County monitoring the situation?

County staff is briefed regularly on the oil's location and movement. Daily reconnaissance flights and conference calls have been suspended due to the reduced threat of oil impact in western Florida, but county staff would be notified in the future if oil products were observed encroaching a trigger zone located approximately 94 miles off Florida's west coast.

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How is Pinellas County updating tactical plans?

County staff and U.S. Coast Guard representatives have updated tactical plans for preventive booming or cleanup operations, including identification of environmentally sensitive areas, staging locations and boat ramps.

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How is Pinellas County securing environmental baseline data?

On June 9, 2010, sediment and water quality samples of Pinellas County shorelines and waterways were taken in coordination with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to document pre-impact conditions. Additional sediment samples will be collected to complete the assessment. Also, aerial photos of local shorelines have been acquired by the Pinellas County Property Appraiser for baseline data.

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How is Pinellas County assisting with volunteer recruitment?

Pinellas County staff developed and posted a [listing of volunteer opportunities for Pinellas County](#). Releases have been sent to the media to inform residents of these opportunities (see [press releases](#)).

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How is Pinellas County keeping residents informed?

Current information and links related to the oil spill, such as fact sheets, news releases, volunteer opportunities and key phone numbers, are posted on the Pinellas County website at www.pinellascounty.org/oilspill. Pinellas County staff is sending community [press releases](#) as needed. Staff is responding to media and citizen inquiries.

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How is Pinellas County reviewing environmental options?

Pinellas County staff is gathering information on long term environmental effects of the oil spill and dispersants on local aquatic resources such as mangroves, tidal marshes and wildlife. Efforts include coordination with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Florida Sea Grant, University of South Florida and other Tampa Bay scientists.

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How is Pinellas County assisting local businesses with claims?

Pinellas County staff is posting information to the [Economic Development website](#) regarding business claims to BP, Florida's Small Business Emergency Bridge Loans and U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) Loans. This website provides links and phone contacts to use if a business has suffered losses due to the oil spill. Staff at Economic Development can help businesses with SBA and Bridge Loan applications. Call (727) 453-7200 for assistance.

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How is Pinellas County promoting tourism?

[Visit St. Petersburg/Clearwater](#) staff launched a [Book with Confidence](#) program for local hotels to offer tourists a guarantee of a free night if they arrive and find beaches affected by the oil in any way. Also, Pinellas County received \$1.15 million in emergency marketing funding to combat the negative perceptions caused by the BP oil spill. There is an ongoing media campaign to get the word out that Pinellas beaches are open.

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Plans for protection, including booms:

How will we know if oil is headed this way?

Daily reconnaissance flights have been suspended, but county staff would be notified if the U.S. Coast Guard determines that oil is approaching Pinellas County. It is anticipated that county officials would have at least a six-day lead time since the process would begin when NOAA 72-hour (three-day) predictions indicate that oil has approached within the "trigger zone area" 94 miles from the Pinellas coastline. View information on the [Trigger Response Plan](#).

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What will be done if oil is heading this way?

If small quantities of tar balls wash up, the U.S. Coast Guard will carry out its regular duties of responding to reports of hazardous material found in the marine environment. A pollution investigator will respond to assess the situation, tar balls will be removed and tested, and a bill sent to BP if the products were associated with the Deepwater Horizon

spill. If large quantities of tar balls are involved, operations will be handled by the U.S. Coast Guard and partner agencies according to the [Area Contingency Plan](#) and based on the current situation, including the impact location, oil characteristics, timing, water conditions, etc. The plan is to use booms, skimmers, nets and any other resources available to corral and capture the oil offshore. The focus will be on protecting the high priority areas identified in the Area Contingency Plan.

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What is the Area Contingency Plan?

After the 1993 Tampa Bay Oil Spill, the U.S. Coast Guard drafted a detailed Area Contingency Plan to prepare for a future oil spill in the area. The plan has been recently updated by local environmental officials and wildlife organizations to identify environmentally sensitive areas in Pinellas County such as mangroves, estuaries, bird rookeries and marshes. This information has been utilized by the U.S. Coast Guard to develop booming strategies to protect each area. View the [Area Contingency Plan](#).

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Where will booms be deployed?

Booms will be used to protect environmentally sensitive areas which have been prioritized by their ecological importance. In general, booms will be deployed to block oil from Pinellas County passes and inlets and to protect coastal marshes, bird rookeries, mangroves and estuaries. Beaches will not be protected with booms. Booms are not effective for beach areas because they are difficult to secure in open water areas due to wave action. The areas targeted for potential booming are outlined in the [Area Contingency Plan](#).

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Why haven't booms been deployed already?

It is too early. The strategy is to wait until oil approaches an area in order to place the correct type of booms at the appropriate location, based on the direction and type of oil that is coming. Also, booms are difficult to keep in place and require regular monitoring. An untended boom can be a barricade to wildlife or a hazard to boaters.

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What about hair booms?

Hair booms will not be used for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. A recent field test conducted during an oil spill in Texas found that commercial sorbent boom absorbed more oil and much less water than hair boom, making it a better operational choice. One problem with the hair boom was that it became water-logged and sank within a short period of time. View more information on [hair booms](#).

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Should I use booms, hay bales or sandbags to protect my property?

Homeowners are discouraged from utilizing booms, hay bales or sandbags to protect their property from oil. Incorrect boom placement in navigable waterways can create a hazard to navigation or harm the natural environment. If a boom is placed by a private citizen, that individual assumes responsibility, including liability, for damage to a boat or wildlife. For more information, view [Homeowner Tips for Protecting Florida's Shoreline](#).

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Cleanup:

Who would clean the beaches prior to oil impact?

Beach managers (city, state and private) handle cleaning beaches on a regular basis. Also, a volunteer pre-oil beach cleanup has been organized by Keep Pinellas Beautiful ([click here to preregister](#)). If notice is received from the U.S. Coast Guard that impact is expected in

72 hours, volunteers who have preregistered will be notified of the cleanup date and time. Volunteers will pick up litter and natural debris (such as seaweed) along the shoreline so there is less material for oil to stick to, thereby simplifying post-oil cleanup efforts.

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Who would clean the beaches after oil impact?

Trained contractors (called [Qualified Community Responders](#)) or a professional oil spill response firm hired by BP would handle post-oil cleanup work in Pinellas County if necessary. No volunteers will be used to clean up oil-contaminated wildlife or debris.

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Where would oil spill debris be disposed?

If oil comes ashore in Pinellas County, the waste will be handled according to the [Florida Department of Environmental Protection disposal guidelines](#). BP has contracted with a waste management company for disposal at an approved facility. The county does not plan to accept oily debris for disposal at the Bridgeway Acres Landfill or large quantities of oily debris for disposal at the Waste-to-Energy facility.

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Wildlife/Environment:

What are the potential effects on local wildlife if oil comes to Pinellas?

Although weathered material is not as toxic as fresh oil, it could still affect birds and other wildlife coming in contact with the material. In general, oil causes harm to wildlife through physical contact, ingestion, inhalation or absorption. Oil can harm a wide range of wildlife, including plankton, fish, shellfish, turtles, birds and marine mammals. Also, indirect contact through bioaccumulation of oil in the food chain is of high concern. For more information, see [FAQs: Wildlife and the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill](#) or [Effects of Oil on Wildlife and Habitat Fact Sheet](#).

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How can I help local wildlife?

If you encounter oiled wildlife, call the BP hotline at (866) 557-1401. Trained paid professionals, not volunteers, would clean oiled wildlife if necessary. You can volunteer at our local wildlife facilities— [Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary](#) and [Clearwater Marine Aquarium](#)—to help with tasks such as feeding animals to free up their trained staff for oil spill work. Donations are also needed.

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Will chemical dispersants be used if oil comes to Pinellas?

No. There are no plans to use chemical dispersants in Florida state waters. However, over 1.8 million gallons of dispersant have been deployed in the Gulf of Mexico. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, dispersants are generally less harmful than the highly toxic oil leaking from the source and biodegrade in a much shorter time span.

Dispersants are used to reduce the potential for damage from oil reaching fragile wetlands and coastal areas. However, the long term effects on aquatic life are unknown. For more information, see [EPA Dispersants](#).

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Is Florida's seafood safe to eat?

Yes. According to the Department of Agriculture, Florida seafood products are safe and plentiful. Most of the Gulf of Mexico is untouched by oil, and commercial fishermen continue to harvest products from these clean waters. Control measures include continual monitoring and water sampling off Florida's coast. When waters are impacted by the spill, immediate action is taken to close the waters to fishing. For more information, see [Florida Department of Agriculture](#) or Sea Grant's [FAQs About Seafood and the Oil Spill](#). There is also a Florida Seafood Availability Hotline at (800) 357-4273.

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