

Galveston CERT Responds to Fifth Largest Oil Spill in U.S. History

On March 22, 2014, nearly 170,000 gallons of heavy fuel oil spilled into Galveston Bay off the coast of Texas after a cargo vessel and barge carrying bunker oil collided with each other. Galveston Bay is one of the largest inlets in the United States, and is a major stopping point on migratory routes for birds. Unfortunately, this spill happened during peak migratory season. In Galveston, Texas many residents make their living from fishing in the bay, so it was imperative to clean the spill quickly to avoid adverse effects on the local economy and wildlife. In addition to being the fifth largest oil spill in U.S. history, this incident also marked the first time that a volunteer group – the Galveston County CERT Program – was recognized as part of the command structure in a Unified Command structure.

On the day of the spill, the Galveston County Office of Emergency Management asked the Galveston County Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) to observe oil movement and locate affected wildlife along the Galveston coastline, and to identify areas requiring attention from professional responders. Responding agencies benefitted greatly from having Galveston County CERT on the scene due



Galveston County CERT volunteers mark and report the location of oil on the beach following the oil spill.

to the team's knowledge of the area and ability to track the spread of the oil. Their expertise helped the U.S. Coast Guard to swiftly respond and direct their efforts to the most affected areas. Galveston CERT volunteers were also familiar with potential hiding places in the impacted area, which helped them to find animals that others could not.

Galveston County CERT volunteers sent pictures of oil and wildlife to incident command using a Global Positioning System (GPS) mapping app on their smart phones. After receiving the photos, a response team would be able to meet volunteers at the location within ten minutes to assist with clean up.

Due to their professionalism and extensive National Incident Management System (NIMS) training, Galveston CERT volunteers quickly gained the trust of professional responders. The training provided volunteers with a foundational understanding of NIMS, which made it easier for them to integrate with and work alongside professional responders using the same system. Many of the volunteers are also trained in incident command, first aid, and search and rescue, and have spent several hours participating in county-wide emergency planning drills. These experiences have helped volunteers to not only learn how to work within the incident command system and communicate with professional responders, but also how to anticipate and address the needs of the other responders and incident command leadership. And because most of its volunteers are NIMS compliant, professional responders are able to delegate tasks and responsibilities to them more readily. "We look at ourselves, even though we're volunteers, as professionals. We take our jobs seriously. We take our community seriously," said Doris Herrmann, a Galveston County CERT volunteer.

Over the course of the incident, professional responders entrusted Galveston County CERT volunteers with additional responsibilities. Volunteers transported wildlife to treatment centers and manned telephone hotlines to help educate the community about the incident. Galveston County CERT received just-in-time training for operating the phone system used by Unified Command, and with the help of Texas Parks and Wildlife officers, CERT volunteers wrote the script that was used for taking phone calls

from the public about affected wildlife. Galveston County CERT was also recognized as a part of the Unified Command structure for the incident. A Unified Command structure is used when multiple governments, or multiple government agencies and services, have some jurisdiction over the incident. City, county, state, and federal government agencies were all involved in the response to the oil spill, and the local Coast Guard Commander served as the incident commander.

After the U.S. Coast Guard and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department observed the effectiveness of the Galveston County CERT volunteers, they wanted non-affiliated volunteer groups who came to assist response and recovery efforts to serve in similar roles. They requested that Galveston CERT train these groups, including organizations that had come from as far away as Rhode Island and Canada, on how to identify the locations of oil and wildlife using a GPS mobile app.

Professional responders praised the CERT volunteers for their leadership during the incident. During an after-action event, a U.S. Coast Guard captain identified Galveston CERT as a responsible partner that demonstrated its ability to make valuable contributions to the community in its time of need. Many CERT volunteers believe they earned the respect of professional responders because they were able to complete tasks responsibly and effectively with little additional oversight. This encouraged professional responders to trust volunteers with even more responsibilities, and to request their assistance during future incidents. "From this one incident, we were called out on other incidents and we are now looked upon as somebody that can be counted on in the County, and that's important," said Galveston County CERT volunteer Gina Gentile.



Galveston County CERT volunteer Doris Herrmann supports Unified Command during oil response and recovery efforts.

Herrmann encourages CERT volunteers to stay involved in the program after they complete the initial training and to bond as a team. "It's not just about that first [training]; it is about everything that happens after that. It's about meeting monthly, regular newsletters, sending each other birthday cards. It is about thinking of yourself as a professional and continuing your education so that you're still excited about being a CERT volunteer because you know people are doing the same things you are."