

STATEMENT OF TOM STRICKLAND, ASSISTANT SECRETARY FISH, WILDLIFE  
AND PARKS BEFORE THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED AGENCIES  
ON THE TRANSOCEAN DEEPWATER HORIZON OIL DISASTER

MAY 27, 2010

Thank you, Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Simpson, and members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify about this unprecedented environmental disaster. Sharing the time with me today is Dr. Marcia McNutt, the Director of the U.S. Geological Survey. Dr. McNutt will provide separate testimony.

I would like to use my time to talk about the work that the Administration is doing to respond to the oil spill. Specifically, I want to describe our efforts to protect the Gulf environment, the efforts of our valiant employees that are working 24/7, and the extensive coordination that is underway in the Federal community with extraordinary help from the States, Tribes, non-governmental organizations, and volunteers.

**Overview**

We are all deeply saddened by the tragedy that occurred on April 20, 2010 onboard the Deepwater Horizon and we are all shaken by the loss of eleven workers and the toll the spill is taking on the environment, the economy, and the livelihoods of the people in the Gulf communities. The focus of our Department is assisting in efforts to shut off the source of the oil, investigate the causes, to remove the oil and remedy environmental impacts, and to begin the process of assessing the impact of this catastrophe on the shoreline and marine ecosystem of the Gulf and beyond. All of our employees are watching this closely and are committed to helping in the effort. Our bureaus are actively engaged in these activities – they are on the frontline and participating in all of the activities. I have been asked by the Secretary to coordinate Interior's oil spill response efforts. I am working with Jon Jarvis National Park Service Director, Rowan Gould Acting Fish and Wildlife Service Director, Bob Abbey Bureau of Land Management Director, and Dr. Marcia McNutt U.S. Geological Survey Director to provide a Department-wide integrated response. These are the key personnel in our Gulf Leadership Team.

We have assembled this highly skilled team of Interior officials to deploy all of the knowledge and resources of our programs to the protection and restoration of the ecosystems of the Gulf. In total, 655 personnel have been deployed as part of the oil spill response, including the Gulf Leadership Team and employees from MMS, FWS, NPS, BLM, USGS, and the Office of the Secretary. We have staff located at the Command Centers in Houma and Robert, Louisiana; Mobile, Alabama; St. Petersburg, Florida; Houston, Texas; and at the Information Center in New

Orleans, Louisiana. We have asked our other bureaus that do not have a direct responsibility in the activities in the Gulf to participate as well by providing staff and support.

The majority of our employees across the Gulf, at parks, refuges, and other locations are monitoring conditions, collecting data, and attempting to protect and restore impacted or potentially impacted resources. Many of these Interior employees live in the communities that encircle the Gulf; many others have worked there at some point in their careers. These employees have dedicated their professions to the conservation of resources and they are dedicating themselves to protecting against and mitigating the impacts of the oil spill. They can relate to the people and communities and the impacts of the events unfolding. They are working to minimize impacts by directing wildlife response efforts, cleaning up oiled animals, assisting in cleanup operations, identifying sensitive areas for booming, and providing overall expert advice on wildlife issues to the Incident Command Structure. Many of the impacts are unseen. Our biologists, together with our federal and state partners, are attempting to understand the impacts on the aquatic ecosystems – these areas are the source of the livelihood of many people in the Gulf. Also, Interior employees have conducted and are continuing to conduct baseline assessments of Interior trust resources to assist in determining overall damages that result from this spill.

### **Spill of National Significance**

The Deepwater Horizon oil spill has been declared a “spill of national significance” by the Department of Homeland Security and is of grave concern to the Department of the Interior. As the agency charged with protecting America’s natural and cultural resources, the Department has vast resources along the Gulf Coast including refuges, parks, and seashores. There are 32 wildlife refuges and eight national park units that are at risk from the spill. In addition to these lands, we have direct responsibilities for migratory birds and threatened and endangered species along the Gulf Coast. We are also working closely with our State partners to protect all of the threatened natural and cultural resources along the Gulf Coast.

As the areas impacted by oil expand so will our efforts. In terms of the immediate response and clean-up, the Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service have the preponderance of Interior-related activities with over 480 employees deployed. We also have many volunteers that are helping us conduct monitoring, cleanup, and wildlife relocation activities.

We are already seeing oil onshore in Louisiana. The hardest hit areas to date are State lands -- the Pass a Loutre Wildlife Management Area and the islands near Port Fourchon. Some beaches have been heavily oiled and oil has reached marsh areas. We have seen brown pelicans, the state bird of Louisiana, covered with oil. It was just a little over five months ago that I stood with Sam Hamilton at Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge in Louisiana as he proudly announced

the delisting of the brown pelican. At that time I said "In many ways, the brown pelican stands as a symbol of our nation's struggle to protect and conserve our wildlife." The struggle goes on.

The Department's holdings in the Gulf area are home to plants and animals and protect cultural resources that could be affected by the spill, including:

- Seagrass beds are nurseries for sea turtles, fish, crabs, shrimp, and many other crustaceans. They also provide an important food source for manatees. Oil will kill seagrasses on contact and this community is slow to recover.
- Salt marshes, which occur in back bays, provide a buffer that protects the mainland during storm events. They also offer foraging sites for birds. If oil kills these plants in the marsh, the soil will destabilize and erode.
- Mangroves are similar to salt marshes in that they provide a buffer between the sea and the mainland, as well as providing wildlife habitat.
- Shipwrecks, archeological sites, Civil War defenses, historic structures, and other cultural resources tell the stories of past inhabitants and key moments to our Nation's past. Damage from oil and cleanup operations is a concern for these treasures.

### **Fish and Wildlife Service**

FWS National Wildlife Refuges are spread out along the Gulf Coast from Florida to Texas, including Breton National Wildlife Refuge. Established in 1904 by President Theodore Roosevelt the refuge provides habitat for a diverse array of wading birds, shorebirds, waterfowl, seabirds, turtles and other wildlife including threatened and endangered species. The oil spill has now reached the sandy islands that form the Breton Refuge. The Delta National Wildlife Refuge adjoins Pass a Loutre Wildlife Management Area to the north. It is unoiled right now because high flows from the Mississippi River have created currents pushing the oil away from the refuge. It remains to be seen what will happen when these flows lessen.

Throughout the Gulf region, in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas, FWS employees are conducting aerial and ground surveys to monitor the spread and impacts of the oil, mobilize response activities, and assess damages. Trained employees are dispatched to recover oiled or injured wildlife, deploy booms, and rescue stranded wildlife. FWS is consulting with the Coast Guard and others on actions that may be taken to add to the protections for lands and resources and they are working with partners to rescue wildlife that are cleaned and released in safe locations. The FWS is also working with other federal and state wildlife agencies to initiate assessment activities to determine damages to impacted resources.

Wildlife faces grave danger from the spill – both short and long-term. Immediate danger to wildlife includes exposure to oil in the water and on the shore. Oiled birds can lose the ability to fly and can ingest the oil while preening. Sea turtles are impacted as they swim to shore for

nesting activities and turtle eggs may be damaged if an oiled adult lies on the nest. Oil and its derivatives will persist in the environment long after the spill is cleaned up and will have long-term impacts on fish and wildlife.

As you know, it has been a very traumatic time for the Fish and Wildlife Service, who lost their Director, Sam Hamilton in February. I would like to thank Rowan Gould, the Acting Director, for stepping in and providing leadership during this very difficult time.

### **National Park Service**

Eight National Park Service units along the Gulf Coast preserve natural and cultural resources, including Gulf Islands National Seashore, Mississippi; Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve, Louisiana; Padre Island National Seashore, Texas; and Everglades National Park, Florida among others.

Impacts are starting to be seen at Gulf Islands National Seashore, Mississippi, where some birds have come in contact with the oil. A northern gannet was rescued for cleaning on West Ship Island by National Park Service staff and crews are reporting some tarballs along some of the park's barrier islands that may have come from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

NPS employees are conducting and overseeing surveys and sampling; documenting baseline conditions; assisting the Coast Guard and contractors during cleanup and recovery; providing guidance and prioritization for protection measures such as boom placement in sensitive areas; and preparing plans for wildlife reconnaissance and recovery and shoreline cleanup.

At the same time, the Park Service notes that all units are open for business and park programs are continuing as scheduled. Visitor education is a continuing activity. Boaters are being urged not to anchor to booms or run them over, as those actions can cause them to pop and sink. The Public Health Service, working with the Environmental Protection Agency, has set up air quality monitoring stations on West Ship Island to check for the presence of harmful volatile compounds. This is being done to ensure the park has the information it needs to protect the public's health while allowing for recreational opportunities. Visitors who spot tarballs are being asked to report the finds to park staff, and not to pick them up.

### **Long-Term Damage Assessment and Restoration**

The longer term assessment and restoration of natural resources impacted by oil spill from the Deepwater Horizon will be conducted under the authority of the Oil Pollution Act. Interior is one of four federal agencies designated to act under OPA, as a "trustee" on behalf of the public, for the purpose of bringing "natural resource damage" claims against BP and all other responsible parties for restoration of injured or destroyed natural resources. Working together

with State and federally recognized Tribal trustees, we intend to, identify the full range of injured resources, and recover from the responsible parties all the funding necessary to fully restore the injured resources and the use of those resources that are lost. The long-term restoration plan for the Gulf will be developed through a public process. Upon completion of the restoration activities, the trustees will conduct monitoring to ensure proper operation and long-term success. These restoration and monitoring actions will likely continue for decades.

The Department has an office dedicated to the management of this process, the National Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Program (NRDAR), which has extensive expertise in conducting these activities. The NRDAR program oversees and provides directions to the bureaus within the Department of the Interior to conduct the assessments and actual restoration work. Together the program and the bureaus work to restore any natural resources injured or lost uses of these resources as a result of oil spills or hazardous substance releases into the environment. In partnership with other affected State, Tribal, and Federal trustee agencies, damage assessments provide the basis for determining the restoration needs that address the public's loss and use of these resources.

The Department has been and will continue the process of collecting and analyzing information to evaluate the nature and extent of injuries resulting from the incident, and determine the restoration actions needed to bring injured natural resources and services back to baseline, pre-incident conditions.

The immediate response and clean-up phase, the Department does everything it can to identify resources at risk and help prevent injury to those resources or their uses. Damage assessment is the critical next step taken on the path to achieving restoration of natural resources injured or lost through the release of oil or hazardous substances. The FWS and NPS continue to work on assessing the lands and wildlife resources in the affected areas of the Gulf Coast.

As I indicated, the FWS, NPS, and BLM have begun the initial assessments required for the longer-term restoration. These efforts will be ongoing as the Department continues the immediate response activities in conjunction with the U.S. Coast Guard.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to describe our efforts around the Deepwater Horizon disaster. The Administration, the Department, and the entire Federal community are committed to doing the utmost to help the region respond and recover. In doing so we hope to minimize impacts to the communities, the environment, and the economy of the areas impacted.