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HEARING ON
OIL SPILL IN NEW ORLEANS IN JULY 2008 AND
SAFETY ON THE INLAND RIVER SYSTEM

HEARING BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COAST GUARD AND MARITIME TRANSPORTATION
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to testify on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA's) role in response to the July 23, 2008, oil spill on the lower Mississippi River near New Orleans, LA. I am Dave Westerholm, Director of the Office of Response and Restoration, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration within the Department of Commerce.

I appreciate this opportunity to highlight the critical contributions provided by NOAA during oil spills. When oil spills into our coastal and inland waters, it can harm people and the environment and cause widespread economic effects. The best remedy is to prevent oil spills by promoting safe marine transportation. When a spill does occur, we must act quickly and effectively to mitigate any harmful effects and restore injured resources. An effective response, based on solid science and smart decision making, reduces environmental and socioeconomic impacts as well as clean-up costs. To ensure a quick and effective response, we must remain prepared for spills by maintaining adequate response capacity and capabilities on hand.

NOAA's Office of Response and Restoration (OR&R) has environmental scientists, oceanographers, physical scientists and biologists spread across three main divisions. These divisions are: (1) the Emergency Response Division, which provides 24/7 technical support to oil spills nationwide; (2) the Assessment and Restoration Division, which works on restoration of marine and coastal habitats after oil spills and chemical releases; and (3) the Marine Debris Program, which coordinates marine debris research, prevention, and removal activities. Staff from all three OR&R divisions, along with other key NOAA programs, supported the U.S. Coast Guard-led response to the New Orleans Barge Spill.

Early on the morning of July 23, 2008, a 600-foot chemical tanker and 200-foot fuel barge collided near downtown New Orleans, LA. The collision tore the barge "DM932" in half, discharging an estimated 270,000 gallons of #6 fuel oil, a viscous tar-like oil. The spill was

initially estimated to be 419,000 gallons, but nearly 150,000 gallons was trapped on the barge and removed during salvage. The barge had just loaded the oil at Stone Oil Co. in Gretna, LA, across the river from the accident site, and was on its way to Memphis, TN. The double-hulled tanker "TINTOMARA," loaded with styrene and biodiesel and outbound for Europe, had only minor damage and did not spill any material. This spill was approximately five times larger than the 53,000 gallons of fuel oil spilled in November 2007, from the COSCO BUSAN in San Francisco Bay.

The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) has the primary responsibility for managing oil spill clean-up activities. NOAA provides Scientific Support Coordinators (SSCs) to assist the USCG in its role as federal On-Scene Coordinator. SSCs lead a team of scientists who provide scientific information that enables better decisions to be made during the response and clean-up. NOAA's response to each incident is dependent on that spill's characteristics, and scientific coordination is critical. Through experience, expertise, and state-of-the-art technology, NOAA forecasts the movement and behavior of spilled oil, evaluates the risk to resources, and recommends protection priorities and appropriate clean-up actions.

The OR&R team was notified shortly after the collision and we provided our first spill forecast predictions to the Unified Command within two and a half hours of the event. Over the following month, we provided 24/7 scientific support, both on-scene and in our Seattle Operation Center. This included daily or twice daily trajectories of the spilled oil, information management, overflight observations, weather and river flow forecasts, and shoreline assessment. Over 200 miles of river shoreline were surveyed to support clean-up activities. In addition, we quickly mobilized OR&R's damage assessment and restoration team to begin collecting data and a variety of environmental samples to initiate restoration planning as a Natural Resource Trustee. I would like to mention and thank the Incident Meteorologists, our colleagues at NOAA's National Weather Service, who provided on-site weather support throughout this event.

To give a sense of the scale of this event, within a few days of the incident, oil from the barge had spread over a hundred miles of the lower Mississippi River. Over 2000 individuals were involved in the clean-up, including over a dozen members of my staff. In addition to harming wildlife, wetlands, and other coastal habitats, the incident resulted in significant economic disruption including extensive waterway closures, closure of municipal and industrial water intakes, and interference with critical channel dredging activities. The closure of drinking water intakes created a concern over the adequacy and quality of potable water for hundreds of thousands of people. Hundreds of ships were trapped or prevented from proceeding through one of the nation's critical waterways. These closures remained in place for over a week because oil continued to leak from the sunken barge. When traffic was allowed to resume, ship traffic was slowed because of the need to minimize vessel wake and because ships had to be inspected and, if necessary, decontaminated before proceeding beyond the spill zone.

The river walk section of the French Quarter was heavily oiled and cross-river ferries were shut down. Several cruise ships were prevented from docking at the Port of New Orleans, resulting in a significant economic loss to the region. Over 200 facilities faced disruption because of the inability to ship or receive products including several crude refineries that rely on river

commerce to provide feedstock oils. NOAA's Scientific Support Team helped to minimize these disruptions and coordinated many of these environmental issues for the Unified Command, including technical issues associated with the fate of and behavior of the oil, shoreline and ship clean-up strategies, protection of water intakes, and contamination of dredge spoils.

The response has been disrupted several times because of severe weather, including the passage of Hurricane Gustav, but the clean-up is nearing completion. NOAA will continue to assist as needed until shoreline clean-up is completed and the response is demobilized. But while the operational response phase is winding down, NOAA's role as a natural resource trustee under the *Oil Pollution Act* will continue to ensure that the natural resources harmed by the spill are restored. NOAA is working with the other federal and state resource agencies and with representatives of the responsible party in a cooperative process to develop a restoration plan.

The Value of Readiness

The collision of a 600-foot chemical tanker and 200-foot fuel barge in one of the nation's most critical waterways is a reminder that accidents still occur, and will undoubtedly continue to occur, despite the many safeguards and improvements that have been put in place since the passage of the *Oil Pollution Act*. In the past six weeks since this incident, NOAA has responded to two dozen other spills around the country. Although the best remedy is to prevent oil spills, and despite our best prevention efforts, the huge volumes of oil moving through our waterways make spills a statistical certainty. Once oil is released into the marine environment, the best that we can do is to quickly and effectively mitigate and restore any harmful effects.

To mitigate environmental effects of future spills, responders must be equipped with sufficient capacity and capabilities to address the challenge. Response training and exercises are essential to maintaining capabilities. Continuous training, improvement of our capabilities, maintenance of our capacity, and investments in high priority, response-related research and development efforts will ensure that the nation's response to these incidents remains effective.

As has been noted, during these events NOAA is relied on to provide detailed information and reliable projections related to an oil spill's location and trajectory. NOAA's ability to observe the ocean environment and obtain timely information on tides, currents, and related oceanic conditions is directly related to the accuracy of the information and forecasts that are provided to incident responders. Our readiness, therefore, relies in large part upon the presence and reliability of ocean observing assets, which are critically important for the collection and integration of this data.

Conclusion

NOAA serves a key role in providing scientific support in emergency response incidents. NOAA's suite of scientific products and services, and the expertise of our personnel, are critical in mitigating harm, providing information for allocation of response assets, restoring adverse effects on natural resources, and informing overall response decision-making. Thank you for allowing me to testify on NOAA's response efforts.