# ASSESSING THE IMPACTS OF OIL: NEXT STEPS

*On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon offshore drilling unit exploded. Eleven workers tragically lost their lives, and an oil release of unprecedented magnitude began flowing into the Gulf of Mexico.*

*Under the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, these events set in motion a process known as a Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA). Federal, state, and tribal trustees are ultimately responsible for assessing injuries to natural resources and their lost human uses and to provide restoration of those resources.*

*Trustees for the Deepwater BP oil spill include representatives from the Department of Commerce, the Department of the Interior; representatives from Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Texas; and Native American tribes.*

### *Resources at Risk*

After oil was released 5,000 feet underwater, some of it remained undersea as a diluted oil mixture, while some rose to the surface as a foamy "mousse." Oil in and on the water can impact resources—from the microscopic organisms that form the basis of the oceanic food web, to fish, turtles, marine mammals, birds, corals, and other deepwater communities.

As oiled water approached shorelines, teams worked to identify sensitive nearshore resources, including oyster beds, aquatic vegetation, and corals that may lie directly in its path. When it reaches land, oily water can severely impact marshes, mudflats, mangrove stands, and sandy beaches. Species that use these habitats—such as crabs, shrimp, birds, turtles, and marine mammals—are also at risk. The trustees are gauging lost human uses of these resources, such as fishing, hunting, boating, and beach closures.

### *Assessment Activities*

The trustees have begun the *injury assessment and restoration planning phase*. Scientific and economic studies will assess and quantify injuries and lost services, and the trustees will develop a restoration plan to identify potential projects to implement during the *restoration phase*. In addition, the trustees will work with the public and the responsible parties to select, implement, and monitor these projects.

## *Public Involvement*

Because the NRDA is a legal process, use of volunteers is challenging. However, during the restoration phase, there may be opportunities for the public to:

- Participate in technical panels to guide restoration.
- Assist in identifying a general range of potential restoration categories.
- Propose specific project ideas.
- Volunteer during implementation or monitoring of restoration projects.
- Act as stewards of restoration projects for the future.

## *More Information*

The following resources are available online:

- Gulf Spill Restoration
  *www.gulfspillrestoration.noaa.gov*
  The latest information about the damage assessment, including preassessment sampling plans.
- RestoreTheGulf.gov
  *www.RestoretheGulf.gov*
  The official federal portal for the BP oil spill response and recovery.
- Geoplatform.gov
  *www.geoplatform.gov/gulfresponse/*
  A one-stop shop for detailed information about the response to the oil spill.

**SCIENCE** ON THE SEAS

- More than 40 offshore research cruises have been conducted or are underway to characterize surface and sub-surface oil and impacted biological communities.
- More than 50 shoreline and aquatic vegetation shoreline sites a day have been surveyed to collect data on the degree and extent of habitat oiling.
- More than 1,800 linear miles of shoreline have been surveyed, and nearly 19,000 samples have been collected.
- Marine mammal and turtle surveys have been conducted since the first days of the spill to establish baseline populations and, more recently, to document the presence of marine mammals and turtles in impacted areas and to locate stranded animals.