As Gulf oil spill persists, so do lessons from Md.

Messages of human readiness, nature’s resilience stand out in wake of 2000 spill that fouled 20 miles of shoreline

By Meredith Cohn
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AQUASCO — A decade after 140,000 gallons of oil leaked into a Patuxent River tributary and became Maryland’s worst spill, the water doesn’t show a hint of the environmental devastation.

But wedge a stick into the bottom of Swanson Creek and it comes up slimed with oil.

Oil from that April 2000 spill fouled 20 miles of shoreline, devastated water-dependent businesses and killed hundreds of turtles, fish, muskrats and other wildlife. Those who helped clean up acknowledge that the process was chaotic, and that remnants of the slick remain buried in the Southern Maryland river bottom.

“Back then, we all had eyes bugging out of our heads because we didn’t know what to do,” said Jonathan McKnight, associate director of wildlife for the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, who helped coordinate the cleanup. “We learned it’s the nature of a large spill that there will be human error, poor equipment, nonperforming contractors, a lack of hotel rooms and bad food, and that all things go wrong when we try and mobilize all these people.”

But he and others also say the area has recovered nicely and that the state is better prepared for the next catastrophe. Perhaps, they say, their hard lessons could even inform those now battling See MD. SPILL, page 14
Frederick L. Tutman, a Patuxent River Riverkeeper, shows oily residue on his finger from the mud of a tributary, Swanson Creek. In background is the Chalk Point power plant.
Md. spill holds lessons for Gulf efforts

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the huge spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

There still isn’t a single cleanup method born of experiences in Maryland, Alaska, the Gulf and other places where oil spilled - each incident has distinct weather conditions and other unique characteristics, McKnight said. But state and national crews who responded to the Swanson Creek spill learned about the importance of preparation and the restorative power of nature, he added.

Perch, rockfish and catfish now live in the waters and are sought by professional watermen, as well as by fishing buddies Shawn Morris of Temple Hills and David McCray of Mount Rainier. Last week they found a spot, at the foot of a bridge, where the water was once covered in oil. It now has a reputation, McCray said, as “a good place to fish.”

A pipeline owned by Potomac Electric Power Co. ruptured in mid-April 2000 while carrying oil from a terminal in St. Mary’s County to a power plant in Prince George’s County.

The conduit had not been inspected by federal regulators for three years, and a report released after the spill found many trouble spots along the 62-mile pipeline, now owned by Mirant Corp. The leak went unnoticed for hours.

Maryland lawmakers quickly moved to add state inspections on intrastate pipelines. (The state Public Service Commission last analyzed inspection records about a week ago, though results were not yet available.)

Unlike the current situation in the Gulf, there were valves on the Potomac pipe that could be turned off to limit the spill. Pepco decided against that move. They had identified in a preparedness plan instituted by a 1990 federal law.

Still, the 867 million gallons of oil did not go smooth, McKnight and others said.

Some booms used to contain the oil had rotted, said Beth McGee, who helped with cleanup as chief of the environmental contaminants branch of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Annapolis.

Crews briefly considered, but ultimately dismissed, the possibility of burning off the oil, in part because of nearby power lines and the pollution, said McGee, now the senior water quality scientist at the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

McKnight said they might have set the fire if they had known what was coming. Wind and waves from a storm blew the nearly contained oil over the booms and into the greater Potomac River from Swanson Creek.

Crews captured and skimmed off what they could, used fertilizer to increase the microbes breaking down oil in the marshes, and cleaned wildlife. As in the Gulf, the spill occurred during nesting and spawning season for wildlife and fish, compound long-term troubles.

McGee said they also dug trenches and used hoses to try to wash oil out of marshes — another mistake.

“Turns out those areas were the slowest to recover,” she said. “As much as we wanted to get oil out of there, one lesson learned is you can do a lot of damage if you have people out there trying to clean up. When they walk, their feet grind a couple feet, driving oil down farther and taking longer to degrade.”

Mother Nature took care of much of the damage within the next year or two, though McGee said there are several places where oil still can be stirred up. The relatively quick recovery from most damage is something for Gulf workers to consider as they ponder how much to “stomp” on sensitive areas in the name of cleanup.

McKnight added that “everyone who experienced the spill in Maryland is looking at the Louisiana and the Gulf Coast with a lot of heartache and pain because of the pictures we know we’re going to see in the next couple months … But 30 years later the capacity of nature to deal with the insult is a source of hope.”

Some of those making a living on the Potomac had little more than hope in 2000. Eric DeSoto, an owner of DeSoto’s Landing in Aquasco, Md., said he took years to rebuild his business. His marina, the closest commercial dock to the Chalk Point power plant, was used as a staging ground for cleanup for two months.

He said those days were “nightmarish,” adding that authorities had little communication with locals, who were left sidelined.

“They physically took the property for 90 days and in the process all of my customer base left, and it took years to try to get customers back,” said DeSoto, who specializes in maintenance and storage of recreational boats from the region. Many other businesses didn’t survive the combination of the spill, Tropical Storm Isabel three years later and a nationwide economic downturn.

Still, he said he wouldn’t leave the business, now operating for 34 years, or the river. The stretch of the Patuxent River that is home to the power plant is placid and shallow. It’s flanked by marshes, surrounded by green trees and visited by the occasional osprey and fisherman.

“You cannot get a more scenic river,” he said.

Fred Tutman, the Patuxent Riverkeeper, said leftover oil is just one problem. The Riverkeepers, part of an international network of waterway watchdogs, are about to report the river’s quality at D-minus.

The river is polluted with urban stormwater runoff, including oil from cars. There is also sewage and agricultural runoff, and some of the biggest polluters are facilities owned by the state and federal governments, which are responsible for enforcing clean-water laws.

“There are miles in the Patuxent watershed, and the spill affected Swanson Creek and the near environs,” Tutman said. “The spill is not necessarily the reason for the D-minus, but it was among them. It’s hard to argue that it was a tipping point, but it was the worst ecological disaster in Maryland history and was preventable.”

Since the spill, several projects have been aimed at revitalizing the area. They included creating 3.7 acres of marsh, enhancing 1.7 acres of terrapin nesting habitat and creating 5 acres of oyster sanctuaries in the Potomac River, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Most of the work is complete.

Meanwhile, state and federal authorities continue to monitor the water and will until all the oil is undetectable, said Robert M. Summers, deputy secretary of the Maryland Department of the Environment.

Crews were joined by a 2007 report that said 38 of 101 sites monitored by the Environmental Protection Agency still showed signs of oil — but not at levels harmful to human health or wildlife. Still, he said, it’s not “a good day to be in the water.”

“... We are working hard to stay vigilant.”

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