Coast 4U Quarterly
Fall 2010 Issue
Q& A with Robin Blanchfield, Supervisor of the California Coastal Commission's Oil Spill Program

Each issue of Coast 4 U Quarterly features an interview with an employee of the California Coastal Commission.

This issue features Robin Blanchfield of the California Coastal Commission's Oil Spill Program. Read on as Blanchfield discusses the recent BP Deepwater-Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and how it relates to California's oil spill prevention policy.

C4UQ: The recent catastrophic 4.9 million barrel BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico turns our attention to our own preparedness for an oil spill off the California coast or in San Francisco Bay. Everyone is asking: can something like the BP Deepwater Horizon well blowout and spill happen offshore California?

RB: The circumstances of the BP deepwater Horizon spill – a mobile oil rig drilling an exploratory well into an unknown high pressure oil reservoir in very deep water - are extreme conditions compared to the situation of California's offshore oil and gas drilling operations. The platforms offshore California are stationary production platforms in much shallower waters. The BP Deepwater Horizon rig was located 50 miles offshore Louisiana at a water depth of 5000 feet. In comparison, California's deepest water platform (Platform Harmony) is located at a water depth of 1,198 feet. The oil reservoir pressures offshore California are also much lower than in the Gulf of Mexico because the oil fields here are "mature" (having produced over many years), and most of the production wells require external assistance (e.g., water injection) to bring the oil to the surface, because the wells and reservoirs do not have enough pressure to "flow" on their own.

Another difference between here and the Gulf of Mexico situation is that the spill prevention and safety systems — such as blow-out preventers — on the production platforms offshore California are inspected and tested monthly. They are also located on the platform above the water surface versus on the ocean floor as in the case of the BP Deepwater Horizon well.

While this does not mean a major blowout on a new well or in a new oil reservoir field could never occur offshore California, the risk is greatly reduced compared to the BP Deepwater Horizon drilling environment in the Gulf of Mexico.

On the other hand, our offshore oil and gas platforms are located much closer to California's coast — the farthest is 10.5 miles and the closest is 1.2 miles offshore – so any size spill is likely to have impacts to California's beaches and sensitive shoreline habitats. California has learned from past spills that even a small spill can have significant impacts on coastal resources depending on the location of the spill.

C4UQ: Please give us a picture of California's preparation for an oil spill.

RB: California's statewide oil spill prevention and response program has some of the highest oil spill prevention, preparedness and response standards in the nation and is a recognized leader in the world. The Department of Fish and Game's Office of Spill Prevention and Response (OSPR), is the lead State agency in charge of California's oil spill prevention, preparedness, response, and natural resource restoration. The OSPR was established by the Lempert-Keene-Seastrand Oil Spill Prevention and Response Act (The Act) of 1990. The Act gives the OSPR Administrator substantial authority to direct all oil spill prevention, response and clean-up activities, natural resource damage assessment (NRDA) and restoration, as well as the authority to conduct studies and incorporate the findings into spill prevention and response programs throughout California.

The OSPR works with 22 other state agencies through the State Interagency Oil Spill Committee to develop California's statewide oil spill prevention, preparedness, and response program. The Coastal Commission, State Lands Commission, the Division of Oil and Gas and Geothermal Resources, the State Fire Marshal, and the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission have separate oil spill prevention responsibilities and standards that require systems safety and oil spill prevention technologies, inspections and maintenance programs, and personnel training for all oil and gas facilities (e.g., pipelines, marine terminals, oil fields, and offshore platforms) within their respective jurisdictions.

California has taken many steps to improve California's preparedness for an oil spill. The OSPR and US Coast Guard work with local governments, industry, oil spill response organizations, environmental and non-governmental groups, Native American tribal councils, and other state and federal agencies to develop Area Contingency Plans (ACPs) to pre-plan for joint spill response responsibilities for San Francisco Bay and each of California's coastal regions. These ACPs define agency roles and contain region specific details that include a worst case spill scenario, identification of sensitive habitats and species, strategies for shoreline protection and cleanup, location and amounts of mechanical recovery, alternative response equipment plans (e.g. dispersants, bioremediation), and wildlife protection and rehabilitation plans. The California regional ACPs also have enhanced electronic GIS-based maps and databases for all sensitive shoreline and marine habitat areas along California's 1100 miles of coast, and the additional 1000 miles within the San Francisco Bay and Delta. These sensitive site protection maps and strategies are updated and field tested annually to improve and validate the effectiveness of the protective boom and oil recovery operations.

California's Oiled Wildlife Care Network is a recognized leader in the nation and the world for its expertise on oiled wildlife care and recovery methods and for the organization of its network for immediate activation during an oil spill response.

California also has an active oil spill drill and exercise program that requires ships and oil and gas facilities to verify the capability of their facility personnel and oil spill response organizations to provide rapid response in the event of an oil spill. As a result of OSPR's high regulatory requirements California's oil spill response industry has one of the largest inventories of oil spill response equipment, vessels, and trained people in the nation.

In conclusion, California is better prepared for an oil spill – no matter what size - than many of the other coastal states in the U.S. But, California is always improving its preparedness and learning valuable lessons from spills like the BP Deepwater Horizon.

C4UQ: What is the Coastal Commission's role in the review of offshore oil and gas development projects for the assurance of safe operations and prevention of spills?

RB: The Coastal Commission has responsibility for the review and approval of all offshore oil and gas development projects proposed in state and federal (e.g., outside 3 miles) waters to ensure that a project is consistent with the resource protection and oil spill prevention and response polices of the California Coastal Act. As part of its review, the Commission requires a proposed project to provide detailed oil spill prevention and response information, including: system safety technologies (e.g. blow out preventers, well casing and cementing), spill prevention and response procedures and training (e.g. pipeline and well emergency shutdown procedures) to prevent and stop an oil spill; worst case oil spill risk analysis (e.g., volume and duration); analysis of potential coastal resource impacts; and analysis of shoreline protection and on-water oil spill containment and clean-up capability. If there are gaps in the protection provided in the project's oil spill information the Coastal Commission can and has required an applicant to provide additional systems safety features, oil spill prevention and response equipment, personnel training, or operational procedures.

Currently, there are 23 oil and gas production platforms operating in Federal waters offshore California. The Coastal Commission has reviewed and approved 13 of the 23 oil and gas platforms currently operating in federal Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) waters offshore California. The other 10 platforms were installed prior to the Coastal Act. Any new or revised plans for offshore oil and gas development in either State or Federal waters will require Coastal Commission review.

In addition to the 23 platforms in Federal waters, there are four oil and gas platforms and two man-made oil and gas islands operating within California's State waters, under the jurisdiction and oversight of the California State Lands Commission. The Coastal Commission works closely with the State Lands Commission (the lead state agency) in the review and approval for all modifications to these offshore platforms and islands in State waters.

C4UQ: Where can the public learn more about offshore oil drilling and California's oil spill prevention and response programs?

RB: The California State Lands Commission (SLC) recently released a report on August 20, 2010 entitled *Production and Marine Terminal Operations in State Waters and the California State Lands Commission's Oil Spill Prevention Programs Protecting State Waters.* This report and much more information about SLC can be downloaded from the SLC website at: http://www.slc.ca.gov/.

Information about the oil and gas platforms in the federal outer continental shelf waters offshore California can be obtained from the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement- Pacific OCS Region (formerly named the Minerals Management Service) website at http://www.boemre.gov/omm/pacific/.

Information about the Coastal Commission's Oil Spill Program, which also has links to information about the BP oil spill and other state and federal agencies, is available on the Coastal Commission website at: http://www.coastal.ca.gov/oilspill/ospndx.html.

Information about California's oil spill prevention and response laws, regulations, and statewide programs is available on the Department of Fish and Game – Office of Spill Prevention and Response website at: http://www.dfg.ca.gov/ospr/.

Information about California's Oiled Wildlife Care Network (OWCN) is available on the OWCN website: http://www.owcn.org.

C4UQ: What can the public do to help in the event of a spill on the California coast or in SF Bay?

RB: California OSPR has a brochure "Oil Spill Response Volunteers: What You Should Know and How You Can Help." You can obtain this brochure and more information at the "Volunteer" tab link at the bottom of the OSPR home webpage http://www.dfg.ca.gov/ospr/ or by calling their Volunteer hotline 1-800-228-4544.

The California Oiled Wildlife Care Network also has information about volunteer opportunities to help with the rescue and rehabilitation of oiled wildlife on their website http://www.owcn.org/volunteer-info.