

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-31](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The *Exxon Valdez* and *Deepwater Horizon* oil spills are two of the largest offshore oil spills in U.S. history, causing long-lasting damage to marine and coastal resources. OPA includes provisions to prevent and respond to such oil spills by authorizing (1) federal-state trustee councils that manage billions of dollars from legal settlements and (2) an interagency committee to coordinate oil pollution research, among other things.

GAO was asked to review the federal government's response, restoration, and research efforts after the *Exxon Valdez* and *Deepwater Horizon* oil spills. This report examines, among other things, (1) how the trustee councils have used the restoration trust funds and the status of restoration and (2) the interagency committee's coordination of oil spill research efforts.

GAO reviewed the councils' plans for the funds and how they were used, federal funding of oil spill research by member agencies, and key laws. Also, GAO evaluated the coordination of such efforts against a leading collaboration practice. GAO interviewed members of the trustee councils and the interagency committee.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things, that the interagency committee coordinate with the trustee councils to support their work and research needs. The agency agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-19-31](#). For more information, contact Frank Rusco at (202) 512-3841 or ruscof@gao.gov.

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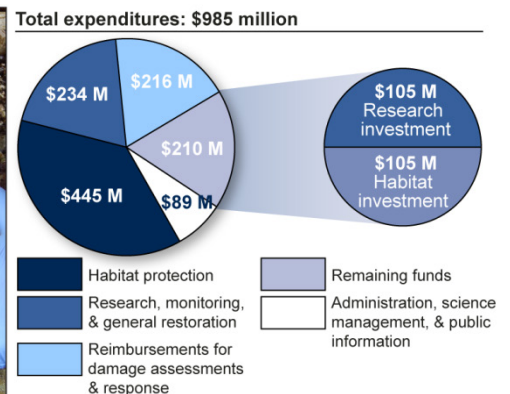
OFFSHORE OIL SPILLS

Restoration and Federal Research Efforts Continue, but Opportunities to Improve Coordination Remain

What GAO Found

The trustee councils, composed of federal and state members, have used portions of the restoration trust funds from the *Exxon Valdez* and *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill settlements to restore natural resources. From October 1992 to January 2018, the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council used about 86 percent of the fund's roughly \$1 billion, primarily on habitat protection and restoration of damaged natural resources. According to the council, all but 5 of the 32 natural resources and human services identified as damaged by the spill have recovered or are recovering. The health of Pacific herring is one example of a resource that has not yet recovered. Further, the presence of lingering oil remains a concern almost 30 years after the spill. In May 2018, GAO accompanied trustee council researchers to the spill area and observed the excavation of three pits that revealed lingering oil roughly 6 inches below the surface of the beach, as captured in the photo below. The Deepwater Horizon Natural Resource Damage Assessment Trustee Council finalized a programmatic restoration plan in 2016; four trustee implementation groups have since issued initial restoration plans for designated restoration areas, and three anticipate issuing restoration plans in 2019 or later. From April 2012 to December 2017, the council used 13 percent of the at least \$8.1 billion restoration trust fund, mostly on habitat protection, enhancing recreation, and marine wildlife and fishery restoration.

A Researcher Collects Lingering Oil from the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill on a Beach in Alaska in May 2018 (Left), and the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council Use of Restoration Trust Fund from October 1992 to January 2018 (Right)



Source: GAO and GAO analysis of Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council data. | GAO-19-31

The Oil Pollution Act of 1990 (OPA), which was enacted after the *Exxon Valdez* spill in 1989, established the Interagency Coordinating Committee on Oil Pollution Research (interagency committee) to coordinate oil pollution research among federal agencies and with relevant external entities, among other things. However according to the trustee council members that manage the restoration trust funds, the committee does not coordinate with the trustee councils and some were not aware that the interagency committee existed. The research of the member agencies could be relevant to the trustee councils' work on restoration. By coordinating directly with the trustee councils, the interagency committee could ensure better knowledge sharing between groups and leverage its member agencies' resources to inform and support the work of the councils.