

Statement on the Gulf Oil Spill and Florida's Cultural Resources

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Archaeologists at the Florida Division of Historical Resources first considered the impact of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill on Florida's cultural resources early in May 2010. At that time we thought that at worst some oil might reach the beaches and be cleaned away around the time the broken oil well was repaired. It became obvious by mid-May that the oil spill was not stopping and that the cleanup and response posed a threat to the resources as well. The Alaska State Historic Preservation Office website includes extensive information on the impact and aftermath of the 1990 Exxon Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound: <http://dnr.alaska.gov/parks/oha/oilspill.htm>. It was clear that harsh cleanup techniques, along with poorly supervised and even more poorly trained response workers, could result in serious damage to the archaeological sites effected by the spill. At the end of May, I spent several days in Mobile, Alabama at the incident command post responsible for the oil spill response for much of the Gulf Coast. I learned about the complex web of federal laws dealing with the release of oil and other toxic substances into the environment, as well as the work of the State Emergency Response Team.

What I found out in Mobile was that the Coast Guard was the lead federal agency, and that there was a considerable group of cultural resources professionals representing a myriad of federal agencies, from the National Park Service to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency, who were formulating a response to protect and assess cultural resources. I joined what was then a biweekly conference call, which often included over 100 participants, from federal and state agencies and American Indian tribes. Over the course of several weeks we learned more about the process and what we needed to do. The actions of the Coast Guard, as the lead federal agency, were governed by Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, and by a special 1997 programmatic agreement specifically addressing oil spills and cultural resources (<http://www.achp.gov/NCP-PA.html>). The group split into technical working groups, formulating response protocols for historic structures, archaeological sites, underwater sites and historic watercraft, data standards and data sharing, traditional cultural properties, and loss of human use. Ultimately, the Coast Guard appointed Dan Odess with the National Park Service as the Historic Properties Specialist for the incident and a plan for staffing each incident command center with cultural resources personnel was developed. The plan includes cultural resources staff in each command center (Mobile, Alabama and Miami centers cover Florida), as well as field personnel to work with the assessment and cleanup teams. The key is quick decision making, as assessment teams return from the field and make cleanup recommendations.

At the state level, the Florida Division of Historical Resources provided data to the teams coordinating assessment and cleanup, along with training aids for cleanup personnel. Staff from our Bureau of Archaeological Research, along with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and our partners at the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, have worked with other federal agencies to develop a specific protocol for damage assessments at underwater archaeological sites, with a special focus on shipwrecks and submerged historic watercraft. Division of Historical Resources personnel,

along with staff representing the Florida Park Service, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, continue to participate in weekly conference calls with the other state and federal agencies and American Indian tribes involved in cultural resources response, and to aid in development and implementation of protocols.

As of this writing, BP is attempting to cap the well and newspapers report that, at least for the present, no oil is leaking from the well for the first time since the April 20 explosion. The response community is hopeful that the leak can be stopped for good. However, even after the leak is controlled, a considerable amount of oil has been released into the environment and presents a threat to resources, either directly or indirectly. Cleanup teams continue to remove oil from beaches and plans continue to be formulated to monitor underwater sites.