

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

# Introduction

**OIL SPILLS** endanger public health, imperil drinking water, devastate natural resources, and disrupt the economy. In an increasingly technological era, the United States has become more dependent upon oil-based products to help us maintain our high standard of living. Products derived from petroleum, such as heating oil and gasoline, provide fuel for our automobiles, heat for our homes, and energy for the machinery used in our industries. Other products derived from petroleum, including plastics and pharmaceuticals, provide us with convenience and help to make our lives more comfortable.

Additionally, non-petroleum oils, such as vegetable oils and animal fats, are increasingly being consumed in the United States. These oils can contain toxic components and can produce physical effects that are similar to petroleum oils. Because they have toxic properties and produce harmful physical effects, spills of non-petroleum oils also pose threats to public health and the environment.

Because we use vast quantities of oils, they are usually stored and transported in large volumes. During storage or transport, and occasionally as the result of exploration activities, oils and other oil-based products are sometimes spilled onto land or into waterways. When this occurs, human health and environmental quality are put at risk. Every effort must be made to prevent oil spills and to clean them up promptly once they occur.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Oil Spill Program plays an important role in protecting the environment through prevention of, preparation for, and response to oil spills. Several U.S. EPA offices and other organizations deserve special recognition for their contributions to the revision of this booklet. They are EPA Regions III and V, the EPA Environmental Response Team, the EPA Office of Research and Development, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the State of Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, the State of Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the University of California Wildlife Health Center, and BP Amoco Corporation.

The purpose of this booklet is to provide information about oil spills. It contains chapters that outline and explain oil spills, their potential effects on the environment, how they are cleaned up, and how various agencies prepare for spills before they happen. Details about five oil spills are provided to show different types of spills and the complexities and issues involved in responding to them. This oil spill discussion includes the *Exxon Valdez* spill of March 1989; the Ashland oil spill of January 1988; the Wisconsin fire and butter spill in May 1991; the Colonial Pipeline spill of March 1993; and the Lake Lanier soybean oil spill in Atlanta in 1994.