Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Outer Continental Shelf Oil Spill Response Capabilities, Panel 1, October 18, 2011

SALERNO:

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Murkowski, distinguished members of the committee. I'm pleased to have this opportunity to answer any questions you may have on response capability and readiness for oil spills originating in foreign waters adjacent to the United States that may affect or threaten our nation or our natural resources.

Protecting the marine environment from oil spills is an important Coast Guard mission. Contingency planning, training and exercises are fundamental to our readiness to respond to oil spills. These, in turn, have their foundation in the National Oil and Hazardous Substances Pollution Contingency Plan, now simply as the NCP. That's a long title.

Contingency planning under the NCP occurs at several levels. Local level planning is conducted by an area committee, under the guidance of a Coast Guard captain of the port, who is also pre-designated as the federal on-scene coordinator for the coastal zone.

The area committee brings together federal, state, local and tribal officials and responders to identify risks, sensitive areas to be protected and protection strategies.

At the regional level, Coast Guard districts participate with other federal agencies and state officials through the regional response team. And they consider such issues as dispersant use and in-situ burning pre-authorizations.

And finally at the national level, the Coast Guard serves as the vice chair of the National Response Team, which is comprised of 16 federal agencies with environmental response functions, and ensures national level capabilities are available, as needed, to support response efforts.

Each of these organizational levels also has a role to play in developing strategies and cooperative relationships with foreign neighbors to enhance preparedness and response to trans-boundary environmental threats.

In particular, we have well established relationships with Canada, Russia and Mexico to achieve cooperation on potential pollution threats, the identification of equipment and personnel needed to respond to actual incidents, and procedures and protocols for notification, incident management and coordinated spill response.

Each of these cases involves cooperation in controlling the source of the pollution as -- as paramount in addressing the trans- national nature of the threat. Without controlling the source, you cannot get ahead of the problem. So the facilitated movement of people and equipment to the source is an essential component of these agreements.

Additionally, these agreements include regular joint planning sessions and exercises. They also help sponsor bilateral cooperation in oil spill research and development. Under these agreements, we've recently completed a major bilateral exercise with Mexico, held in San Diego this past August.

We also held a joint U.S. Coast Guard/Canadian Coast Guard environmental summit this past month. And next month, I plan to meet with the Russian delegation here in Washington to sign a bilateral memorandum of understanding that will expand our parent cooperative agreements to cover the entire U.S./Russian boundary waters.

We are also working with Russia, Canada and the six other Arctic nations through the Arctic Council, to produce an arctic- wide pollution preparedness and response instrument that will build on our existing bilateral agreements to enhance preparedness throughout the Arctic region.

In light of the growing interest in oil exploration in the northern Caribbean, we are also working hard to improve regional cooperation there. The anticipated drilling in -- off Cuban waters is a salient example, but others, like the Bahamas, are also considering deepwater drilling operations.

By working through the International Maritime Organization, we've garnered support for a regional, multilateral seminar to be held, to which other Caribbean nations will be invited, including the Bahamas, Jamaica, Cuba and Mexico, for the purpose of discussing oil spill prevention and response issues.

Meanwhile, we're working extensively with all of our domestic response partners to update our contingency plans. We're also engaged directly with Repsol, the Spanish company which plans to drill the first well off Cuba, starting in January of 2012, to better understand their response strategies, their resources and their capabilities.

In the event an oil spill does occur within Cuban waters, the Coast Guard would mount an immediate response under the NCP and partnership with other federal, state and local agencies. We would focus on combating the spill offshore, using all available response tactics.

As was highlighted by the Deepwater Horizon spill, any spill of national significance, regardless of its source, will require a unity of effort across all levels of government, industry and the private sector.

Thank you, and I look forward to answering your questions.