

Plan may not be out, but oil-spill cleanup continues

Oversight » Long-term teams arrive to collect the 12,000 remaining gallons of oil.

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Chevron spokesman Dan Johnson gives details about the... (Leah Hogsten / The Salt Lake Tribune)



So where does the cleanup of the Red Butte Creek oil spill go from here?

That's what everybody wants to know as cleanup crews begin to replace the emergency teams that have worked on the spill since Saturday.

"What is your written plan for cleanup and mitigation?" demanded resident Ryan McDermott at a Salt Lake City town hall meeting earlier this week.

Well, even though a formal plan has not been released --- it could be weeks away -- that doesn't mean cleanup isn't happening.

"There will be no suspension of cleanup activities," noted Walt Baker, director of the Utah Division of Water Quality.

Certainly not, Chevron spokesman Dan Johnson said Wednesday.

"On Saturday, we immediately began to soak up oil. That's why we have collected 500 barrels so far," he said. "There's still 300 more [barrels of oil] out there, and we will work diligently to clean it up."

Government health and environment agencies huddled Wednesday afternoon at the new Utah Department of Environmental Quality offices to outline their respective roles in making sure Chevron gets the job done right in the weeks -- and possibly months -- to come.

Baker said the formal cleanup plan (which will be released to the public) will be part of Chevron's official response to a "notice of violation," or NOV, from his agency. And the NOV will not be completed for another 10 days or more.

That NOV triggers the formal process for dealing with an environmental accident, Baker said. It also makes Chevron legally accountable, he added.

For Baker's office, that means restoring Red Butte Creek, Liberty Park's pond, the Jordan River and all other affected areas to their pre-spill state -- as outlined in state water-quality laws.

For Salt Lake City, it means ensuring that groundwater remains unpolluted and that residents and businesses see their properties fully restored.

For state and federal wildlife agencies, it means addressing the harm suffered by waterfowl, their food supply and their habitats.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has established its own formal organization, a "Unified Command," to coordinate the agencies' efforts. And through to-do lists generated by this umbrella organization, each agency will work to ensure Chevron follows cleanup laws. The government agencies also will submit bills to Chevron for their expenses.

Ray Loken, a conservation officer with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, said the goals have changed now that the spill has been contained.

"We've already passed the worst-case scenario," he said, "because it was contained early enough."

So state wildlife crews have been scouring the streambeds and banks to assess the damage and suggest what should be done next. Their inventories include not only birds and fish, but also insects, larvae, snails and other elements of the waterways' vital food chain.

The EPA credited Chevron for taking responsibility and tackling the cleanup aggressively.

"We expect and will work to ensure that they remain responsive," the EPA said in a e-mail, and fulfill its promise to cover cleanup costs.

"EPA has been and will continue to review and provide direction on incident objectives, and progress made under those objectives," the e-mail continued. "We will ensure that actions taken are sufficient to clean up the spill."

During a Wednesday afternoon tour of the spill site, right across the creek from where roadies set up Red Butte Garden's sound systems for the night's Steve Martin bluegrass concert, Chevron's Johnson reiterated that the company was taking responsibility for the damage.

He said the arrival of long-term cleanup teams marks the start of a lengthy effort to collect the 12,000 gallons of oil that remain in the ground after Chevron successfully removed 21,000 gallons.

Johnson said investigations continue into the leak's cause and the failure of pipeline sensors. The federal office of pipeline safety, he added, has been poring over reams of data at Chevron's monitoring center in Houston.