

Spill of National Significance

The National Contingency Plan (NCP) defines a spill of national significance (SONS) as:

“a spill that, due to its severity, size, location, actual or potential impact on the public health and welfare or the environment, or the necessary response effort, is so complex that it requires extraordinary coordination of federal, state, local, and responsible party resources to contain and clean up the discharge.”

The NCP describes, in part, the federal government’s responsibility for strategic coordination and support of federal on-scene coordinators (FOSC) when responding to a SONS. To meet these responsibilities, the U.S. Coast Guard may establish a National Incident Command (NIC) based on the “Area Command” organizational model used for major/multiple incident management within the National Interagency Incident Management System (NIIMS).

When the Commandant classifies a discharge as a SONS, the Commandant may name a NIC. The NIC will establish a National Incident Command organization. Pursuant to 40 CFR 300.323, the NIC will assume the role of the FOSC in:

- communicating with affected parties and the public;
- providing strategic coordination of federal, state, local, and international resources at the national level. This strategic coordination will involve, as appropriate, the National Response Team, the Regional Response Team, the governor(s) of the affected state(s), and the mayor(s) or other chief executive(s) of local government(s).
- coordinating with the senior corporate management of the responsible party (RP).

The National Incident Command does not replace the on-scene Incident Command System organization(s) or functions. Tactical operations continue to be directed at the on-scene Incident Command level. The NIC will be established to include representatives of the RP and affected federal, state, local and international interests. Representatives to the NIC should typically be at the highest executive levels of the RP and responding government agencies.

To ensure preparedness for such a broad-reaching emergency, federal, state and local government response agencies; industry response organizations; and their supporting and cooperating agencies conduct simulated response operations designed to mirror an actual SONS event.

The lessons learned from SONS exercises are invaluable to all parties involved since the drills can serve as a safe proving ground to access how well multiple agencies and organizations come together in an emergency. Also, various new methods and technologies can be implemented in a forgiving environment that makes allowances for adjustment and evaluation.

The 2002 SONS exercise is the third SONS exercise. The first, a Coast Guard sponsored drill that took place in Philadelphia in September 1997, simulated the collision of two tankers at the mouth of the Delaware Bay. The second was an industry-sponsored exercise, which took place in Anchorage, Alaska, in September 1998. Its scenario involved a tanker rupture causing a simulated spill of more than 300,000 barrels of crude oil into Prince William Sound.