

The Case of the Mystery Spill

Story by PA2 Bobby Nash, PADET Jacksonville, Fla.

GUANICA, Puerto Rico -- Pristine beaches with water so blue it looks like it's out of a cartoon, exotic birds and fish all around, and of course the beautiful people enjoying their once-a-year vacation was the scene in August at Puerto Rico's southwest beaches.



GUANICA, Puerto Rico - Oil sheen from a mystery spill on the southwestern coast of Puerto Rico. The oil sheen is approximately one-quarter of a mile long. Coast Guard photograph by PA2 Bobby Nash.

That wasn't the case by the end of the month. Instead, there were mangroves covered in thick sludge and beaches that looked like a disaster area, which all seemed to appear overnight right before everyone's eyes like a Chris Angel illusion. The only thing missing from this mystery was a sinister plot and a talking dog.

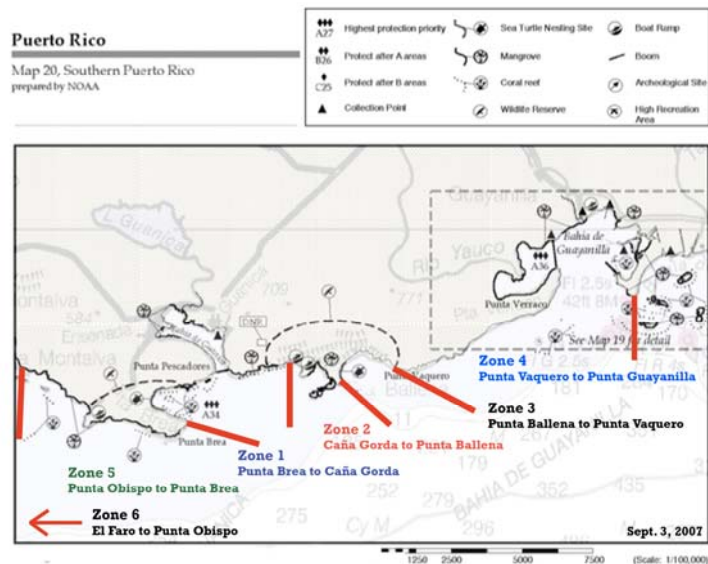
The initial report of the spill came into Coast Guard Sector San Juan, Puerto Rico, from the Puerto Rico Police Joint Forces of Rapid Action (F.U.R.A.) the morning of Aug. 30.

"The smell on the beach with all the oil was overwhelming, said Petty Officer 1st Class Jennifer Johnson, a public affairs specialist sent to one of the beaches for assessment and documentation. "

Coast Guard crews and other federal and local agencies quickly responded to contain the mystery spill and protect the natural beauty and wildlife of Puerto Rico.

"We deployed five shoreline assessment teams to determine the nature and extent of the contamination," said Capt. James E. Tunstall, federal on-scene coordinator for the response and Coast Guard Sector San Juan's commanding officer.

First responders quickly got the word out through print, radio and television media for locals and vacationers to stay out of the affected areas.



Map courtesy of the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration.

“It is extremely important that people do not go into the water throughout the contaminated area from Punta Ventana to Guayanilla Bay until environmental experts determine that it is safe to do so,” said Javier Velez Arocho, Secretary, Puerto Rico Department of Natural Resources.

Contractors, government employees and military personnel feverishly worked together to clean beaches, gather oil in the water and protect unaffected areas with boom.

The beach cleanup was especially back-breaking work. Workers raked and bagged by hand like worker ants along the remote beaches that were impacted by the spill. The hard labor was necessary because using heavy equipment could possibly have led to more damage to the once beautiful beaches.

Coast Guard and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration personnel identified several possible sources of the spill within 30 days of responding to the mystery spill. Some of the possible sources included ships that were in the area at the time of the spill.



GUANICA, Puerto Rico - Members of the National Response Corporation survey an oiled beach on the southwest coast of Puerto Rico during a mystery oil response Sept. 2. Coast Guard photograph by PA2 Bobby Nash.

One of those ships was the General Maritime-owned *Genmar Progress*. The Coast Guard boarded the *Genmar Progress* in Port Arthur, Texas, Sept. 26, and with the assistance of the ship's crew, concluded the *Genmar Progress* may have been the source of the spill.

General Maritime sent personnel to the Puerto Rico to assist in the cleanup shortly after being identified as a possible responsible party. General Maritime Management was later officially designated by the Coast Guard as the responsible party Oct. 2.

The unified command set up to oversee product recovery operations was officially demobilized Oct. 15 after assessment and cleanup crews determined that all recoverable product or oil had been recovered from the affected areas. Cleanup operations could start again if any additional recoverable oil is found.

Cleanup crews recovered approximately 1,000-cubic yards of material from the water, beaches and mangroves and approximately 19,000 gallons of contaminated water with concentrations of five – to 10-percent oil. So far, the cost of cleanup and recovery efforts are estimated to be more than \$6 million.

"The cleanup and recovery operations have concluded for the mystery oil spill," said Tunstall. "However, we will continue to thoroughly investigate this incident and monitor the affected area in case any new recoverable oil is identified that needs to be cleaned up."

Although cleanup operations are completed, the investigation has not. Coast Guard pollution investigators will continue investigating until the source of the mystery spill is identified.



GUANICA, Puerto Rico - National Response Corporation employees bag oily debris on an affected beach in southwestern Puerto Rico Sept. 2. Coast Guard photograph by PA2 Bobby Nash.

General Maritime is working closely with Coast Guard investigators until it can be determined if all the recovered oil is from General Maritime's *Genmar Progress*.

"General Maritime Management is committed to environmental stewardship and continues to cooperate fully and completely with the U.S. Coast Guard in this investigation," said Darrell Wilson, a spokesperson for the company.

"It is good to have a ship owner recognize that they may be the source of the spilled oil, and then assist in the response and cooperate in the investigation," said Captain Ray Perry, deputy commander of Coast Guard Sector San Juan. "However, our investigation into this incident continues. The spill remains a mystery until we are confident that we know the origin of all of the oil we are cleaning up. We are going to be thorough in our investigation."

USCG