At a Glance

Limited Oil Spill Funding Since the Enbridge Spill Has Delayed Abandoned Oil Well Cleanups; Emergency Oil Responses Not Impacted

What We Found

We reviewed hotline allegations that: (1) the EPA failed to request additional oil spill funding in response to its ongoing Enbridge pipeline spill costs and other uncontrolled oil discharges; (2) the EPA headquarters told regions there would be a shortage of emergency funding through 2014; (3) limited funding resulted in cleanup delays at known oil-discharge sites; (4) the EPA's administrative orders lacked required language specifying which costs can be recovered by the government; and (5) the EPA had not submitted requests for reimbursement of its Enbridge spill oversight costs. Our findings partially substantiated allegation 1 and substantiated allegation 3, but did not substantiate allegations 2, 4 and 5.

Also, according to EPA staff, the Enbridge spill has not impacted the EPA's ability to respond to classic emergency spills, such as tanker truck rollovers and pipeline breaks. However, EPA Regions 2 and 4 staff said limited funding due to the spill has caused delays and impacted their ability to respond to abandoned oil wells in their regions. Regions 2 and 4 have identified abandoned oil well sites that have leaking wells that impact or threaten surface waters. Cleanup delays at these sites could result in further contamination, posing a threat to wildlife, fish, and underground sources of drinking water. Although the EPA's Office of Emergency Management staff were aware of the risks, the OEM prioritized its limited funding for classic emergency oil spills. The OEM has not coordinated with Regions 2 and 4, or other regions, to develop a nationwide plan to address abandoned oil wells. Agency staff said they requested additional funding for the Enbridge spill. However, the EPA did not request additional funding for abandoned oil well removals.

We also found that the EPA lacks technical guidance on oil spills, which results in emergency responders using their discretion to develop and execute response actions. While this may be adequate and sufficient for typical emergency oil spills, the large-scale release of tar sands oil in the Enbridge spill had not been encountered before by the EPA. Oil spill guidance or a more robust application of lessons learned from major oil spill cleanups could provide essential information for other EPA regions to use in future spills of this nature.

Recommendations

We recommend that the OEM establish risk-based priority criteria for use by the regions in their requests to EPA headquarters for Oil Spill Liability Trust Fund funding and in implementing oil spill responses. We also recommend that the OEM develop a process for sharing lessons learned from large or unprecedented oil spills such as Enbridge. OEM agreed with both recommendations. One recommendation is complete, both are resolved, and no further response to the final report is needed from the agency.