



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL OCEAN SERVICE

Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary
991 Marine Drive
San Francisco, CA 94129

May 12, 2023

MEMORANDUM FOR: THE RECORD

FROM: Maria Brown *MB*
Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary

SUBJECT: Transition Plan for the AMERICAN CHALLENGER

I. PURPOSE:

To identify next steps and agency roles for the AMERICAN CHALLENGER incident response in preparation for potential future phases of salvage and removal planning for the vessel.

II. BACKGROUND:

On March 5, 2021, the 128-foot towing vessel HUNTER (O.N. 578655) lost propulsion while towing the 90-foot AMERICAN CHALLENGER (O.N. 633219) from Puget Sound to Mexico. Both vessels began drifting toward the Bodega Bay, CA shoreline creating an immediate environmental threat to the sensitive areas in Bodega Bay and threatening the NOAA Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary. The HUNTER was successfully towed to the Army Corps. of Engineers' facility in Sausalito, CA and the AMERICAN CHALLENGER subsequently ran aground in Bodega Bay at position 38°16' 54.2" N, 122° 59' 37.8" W. The AMERICAN CHALLENGER is a U.S. flagged vessel home ported in Seattle, Washington. It is a 40-year-old, steel hull vessel that has a weight of 197 gross tons. The vessel has been grounded in the approximate position 38° 16' 54.2" N, 122° 59' 37.8" W since the incident occurred. Significant damage to the hull and other structures have occurred due to the strong current, high surf, and strong tidal activity.

Due to insufficient actions by the responsible party, the Federal On-Scene Coordinator authorized the use of the Oil Spill Liability Trust Fund (OSLTF) in order to address the imminent oil pollution threat to the environment. A Unified Command (UC) was established in March 2021, and has been actively working on the incident. Working with marine salvage contractors, the U.S. Coast Guard has succeeded in pulling the vessel shoreward by approximately 50 feet to a shallower position. Contractors have focused on removing portions of the vessel to lighten and tow the vessel closer to shore in order to access fuel tanks. Efforts over the last 18 months successfully removed 53,070 pounds of material and all currently accessible oil pollution has been removed.

The USCG has determined that the National Pollution Fund Center (NPFC) can no longer support the removal of the AMERICAN CHALLENGER at this time. The UC will stand-down and be replaced with a coalition of State and Federal agencies moving forward. With this phase of the response concluded, the UC will transition to a group of coordinating agencies that will seek additional funding to address the remaining threats of pollution, marine debris, and habitat degradation to the marine environment posed by the AMERICAN CHALLENGER.

Since the vessel still poses a threat to the Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary (GFNMS) and the natural resources of the public trust, both from pollution and hazmat onboard and from the presence of the vessel itself, which if left in place, will continue to impact sensitive rocky reef habitat and create an ongoing source of marine debris, NOAA has prepared this memo to identify interim roles for each of the agencies that served on the UC thus far and to identify potential next steps for future salvage of the AMERICAN CHALLENGER.

III. TRANSITION PLANNING:

The UC will transition to an Agency Coalition to evaluate alternative approaches to vessel removal, while taking steps to secure additional funding. The collective goal is to address pollution, marine debris, and habitat degradation posed by the AMERICAN CHALLENGER. The Agency Coalition will ensure continued monitoring of the AMERICAN CHALLENGER and will respond as appropriate to pollution releases and wildlife issues.

Specifically, each agency agrees to the following roles:

1. **NOAA Great Farallones National Marine Sanctuary (GFNMS):** As federal trustee for the Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary, NOAA will continue to work with Federal and State agencies to:
 - a. Identify and work to secure future project funding;
 - b. Facilitate identifying a new lead agency and partners for subsequent salvage phases if funding is procured; and
 - c. Provide technical expertise on resources and risk (RAR) and salvage planning.

2. **U.S. Coast Guard (USCG):** USCG will continue to support efforts to remove the vessel through:
 - a. Performing periodic overflights for this area when feasible to monitor the vessel condition and look for sheening/fuel release (overflights will be most valuable to conduct during and immediately after big surf events which could impact the vessel);
 - b. Re-engaging through the National Response Center (NRC) and with the Regional Response Team (RRT) to remove pollution from the vessel in the event that a future salvage phase is conducted and any remaining fuel threats onboard can be confirmed and accessed;
 - c. Providing technical expertise on future salvage planning and operations;
 - d. Providing archival documentation as needed for all salvage operations conducted thus far; and
 - e. Providing on-scene support for vessel traffic, waterways safety, and where necessary during any future salvage operations.

3. **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA):** USEPA will continue to support efforts to remove the vessel through:

- a. Re-engaging with agency partners to provide funding to assist with vessel disposal costs; and
 - b. Providing technical expertise on hazmat removal and salvage operations.
4. **California Department of Fish & Wildlife (CDFW):** CDFW will continue to fill the role of State-On Scene Coordinator (SOSC) and support the incident response by:
- a. Responding to any reports of sheening within any environmentally sensitive sites; Continuing to maintain the pole-mounted camera currently in place on the bluff for monitoring the vessel condition and position (to be maintained for the foreseeable future as funding allows); and
 - b. Providing technical expertise on resources and risk (RAR).

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CDR Rhianna Macon, USCG, IC

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Mr. Harry Allen, IC, EPA

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May 14, 2023

LT Kyle Hiatt, IC, CAL F&W

Date



May 12, 2023

Maria Brown, Superintendent
Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary &
Cordell Bank National Marine Sanctuary

Date