

Biological Oils Transported by Rail



White Center Pond biological oil spill, Nov. 2015

MORE INFORMATION

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Protecting citizens, our environment and economy from spills: Biological oils transported by rail

Oil carried by railroads in Washington is transported through cities, rural communities and along numerous rivers, water bodies and across sensitive environments. In eastern Washington, biological oils are moved in support of our agricultural industry. Rules recently passed by Ecology as directed by the 2015 Washington State Legislature require railroads that carry biological oils to prepare oil spill contingency plans and participate in oil spill drills. Contingency plans confirm rail operators have the capability to make notifications, access pre-staged equipment and stand ready to mount an appropriate response to an oil spill. These important plans and required drills that test the plans ultimately ensure that Washington is better protected should a spill occur.

Biological oils

Biological oils, such as vegetable oils and animal fats, are included in the definition of oil under Washington state law because they share common physical properties with petroleum oils and have similar impacts on the environment when spilled. Although less toxic and flammable than petroleum oils such as Bakken, these oils contain components that can cause devastating effects to fish, wildlife and plant species. These oils generally do not evaporate, emulsify, or disperse well in water so they tend to coat anything that comes into contact with it including shorelines, plants and wildlife. These oils can saturate birds' feathers, affecting their ability to fly and keep warm. Animals with fur that come into contact with these oils are at risk of hypothermia. Oil that sinks and enters the water column can impact fish and subtidal organisms including planktons which is critically important for the food chain.

WHITE CENTER POND

The biological oil spill at White Center Pond in November 2015 demonstrated the impact biological oils can have on our environment.



Biological oils leave a sheen on the surface of water, just like petroleum oils.



Like petroleum oils, biological oils require response and restoration actions.



Biological oils injure wildlife by oiling their feathers, fur or gills.

Planning is important: Washington's approach to planning and preparing for spills of biological oils

Regardless of the volume of biological oil moved by rail it is important to plan and be prepared for spills because of the potential impacts. Good planning can reduce your clean-up costs and is a must to implement a rapid, aggressive and well-coordinated response. Washington's approach to planning for biological oils spills from rail cars is responsible and reasonable. These new requirements share many of the same contingency planning requirements as larger oil handlers and transporters in the state while offering a more proportionate and flexible approach for smaller rail road operations.

Ecology included elements in the rule that reduce costs and make it easier for smaller operations to comply including:

- Ability to submit federal plans as state plans if they meet the proposed requirements.
- Ability to submit a single shared plan for multiple rail carriers.
- Equipment standards scaled to the volume carried.
- Longer time period (phase-in) to submit a plan based on the rail road size and cargo type.
- Flexibility and sharing in drill requirements.
- Ability to reference the Northwest Area Contingency Plan rather than reproducing and maintaining the information in the plan, including competed geographical response plans (GRPs), Incident Command System (ICS) procedures, and response equipment.
- An easy-to-use boilerplate plan template for rail plan holders transporting exclusively biological-based oils.

All oil spills can cause impacts. Ecology has worked extensively with its partners and industry to find the right balance in these regulations. Washington is now better protected as a result of this proportionate and responsible approach to ensuring rail roads that carry biological oils have the capability to mount an appropriate response to spill.