OIL SPILLS

Local company trains for oil spill: Elastec/American Marine takes part in exercise


The aerostat component of OceanEye, an oil spill aerial surveillance system built by Maritime Robotics, a Norwegian company, is being inflated in preparation to launch during an Elastec/American Marine oil spill recovery demonstration on the Ohio River. (Provided)

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A system that was recently demonstrated on the Ohio River near Evansville, Ind., may someday play a vital role in the protection of some of Earth's most sensitive terrain.

A team from Elastec/American Marine based in Carmi, with assistance by Evansville Marine Services, deployed an oil spill recovery and surveillance system designed to identify, contain and collect oil spilling from road accidents or broken pipelines into remote rivers. (No oil or other substance was released into the river, and all the appropriate agencies were notified in advance of the exercise and granted their approval.)

Oil spills occur in widely varying conditions, from offshore to inland waterways, to warm and icy climates. Canada's northern rivers, for instance, are typically wide and shallow, with potentially high currents and poor access, Paul Smith, chief engineer for product development of Elastec/American Marine, said.

"As wild and remote as they are, those rivers are ecological jewels," he said. "And they are frequently intersected by pipelines. That combination of characteristics presents unique challenges to oil spill responders."

That's where Elastec/American Marine comes in. The 23-year-old Southern Illinois based company is North America's largest manufacturer of oil spill recovery and environmental protection equipment. The company has helped with spills on land, in lakes and streams around the world, including in the Gulf of Mexico after the 2010 Deepwater Horizon spill. It manufactures floating containment barriers, a wide variety of skimmers and the power units to operate them and workboats.

The company's equipment was engaged in the system demonstrated recently, along with several components from other firms, to hopefully create the most effective oil spill recovery system ever developed. The spill response demo system included these elements:

l A motorized barge provided and piloted by Evansville Marine Services, Evansville, Ind.

l Two 150-foot legs of solid-core, 8-inch E/AM OptiMax boom.

l Two shallow-water BoomVane devices developed by ORC of Sweden and manufactured and marketed worldwide by E/AM.

l An oil spill response vessel built by Kvichak Marine Industries, Seattle, Wash. and equipped with a MARCO Filterbelt skimming system.

l An E/AM 1,500-gallon Towable Bladder into which oil recovered in a real operation would be pumped.

l An oil spill aerial surveillance system, OceanEyeTM, invented by Maritime Robotics and marketed internationally by E/AM.

The configuration might be compared with a baseball diamond, with the motorized barge at second base, the BoomVane at first and third bases and the OSRV at home plate. Tension lines connect the motorized barge and the BoomVanes, which in turn use the force of the river's current to direct the boom (trailing astern) into a "V" configuration. A single motorized barge or towboat has the ability to sweep a path several hundred feet across, funneling any oil or debris within the sweep area into the apex (home plate), where the OSRV skimming system picks it up.

Another element of the demonstration was the deployment of an OceanEyeTM, a helium-filled aerostat tethered to a support boat. The balloon-like device rose to about 200 feet above the surface, and a sophisticated video camera mounted aboard it relayed a real-time view of the area below to the task force commanders. That "eye in the sky" will enable future observers to search out and find areas of contamination much more effectively than viewing from a boat.

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