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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

South Dakota Guard assists in Hurricane Ike pollution recovery efforts

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PASADENA, Texas – Fuel and propane tanks along with barrels of toxic chemicals are just a few of the environmental hazards threatening the Texas Gulf region in the aftermath of Hurricane Ike.

For more than a week now, the South Dakota National Guard's 82nd Civil Support Team has scurried to locate these displaced pollutants and identify their contents as well as their sources.

The team, consisting of 17 members from Rapid City and five members of North Dakota's 81st CST, was called up, Sept. 25, to help survey the coastal areas, waterways and marshlands near Houston for hazardous material containers.

"We are finding hazardous material containers everywhere down here," said Maj. John Emick, commander of the 82nd. "The Houston and Gulf Coast area is almost entirely made up of oil and fuel refineries and chemical plants – so there is tons and tons of this stuff."

The Rapid City based unit has been working with a unified command of four federal and state agencies - the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, the Texas General Land Office, the U.S. Coast Guard and the Environmental Protection Agency - to efficiently coordinate efforts to assess, contain and clean up spills and hazardous materials caused by the hurricane.

"If we don't get out there to clean this stuff up it's going to be an even bigger environmental disaster. Some of this stuff is potentially dangerous and can harm people and the environment," said Emick. "The EPA is taking the lead on finding this stuff now and disposing of it properly."

Steady progress has been made in identifying, assessing and overseeing the cleanup of post-hurricane pollution sites throughout southeast Texas. The types and amount of pollution vary from oil and diesel fuel from boats to industrial chemicals.

According to a National Strike Force (NSF) press release, unified command personnel have responded to a total of 2,221 pollution and displaced hazardous material reports. No major oil spills or hazardous materials issues have yet been identified.

Of the total reported cases, 1,774 remain open, with 10 of those sites remaining in the assessment phase. The unified command has closed 447 cases.

“These cases are typical of what we find after storm surges and hurricane-force winds,” said Incident Commander Althea Foster of the EPA. “They are typically small and are all very manageable.”

The CST members are primarily responsible for identifying and marking the hazardous materials and recording their location. They also provide valuable expertise should the need arise.

Uniquely trained and equipped, the 82nd has at its disposal the latest military and commercial detection equipment and top-notch communications to provide rapid analysis of unidentified substances.

So far, the 82nd has helped to identify about 15 separate types of hazardous material containers and spills each day – finding everything from 150 gallon fuel containers to 250-pound propane tanks.

“We see everything from blue industrial garbage cans, oxygen bottles, propane cylinders and overturned trucks,” said Emick. “The teams inspect them, and if there is a leak we’ll get a hazardous material team out to clean it up and stop the pollutants from going into the ground or into the ocean.”

A spokes person for the NSF says, assessment teams investigate reports of possible cases of pollution and prioritize the cleanup efforts. Once a reported case is confirmed, the teams work to identify the source and try to identify and notify a responsible party (RP).

If a RP is identified, that party may hire a contractor to secure the source of the spill and clean up the pollution. If no RP is identified, the government team hires a spill contractor to clean up the pollution. Recovery teams then oversee the contract cleanup efforts and conduct a final assessment to ensure the area’s cleanliness.

“The civilian populous is where we are getting a lot of our information on where these containers are lying,” said Sgt. Keith Bryant, survey team member with the 82nd. “The people are really relying on government agencies like FEMA and Texas Emergency Response to help them get through this and we want to help any way we can.”

Because of the vast areas to be surveyed, five CSTs from across the nation were called up with a new team rotating through every few weeks.

The 82nd CST is one of 55 teams across the U.S. and its territories designed to integrate with the Incident Command System to provide a crucial capability between the initial local response and federal assets.

According to Emick, the unit often trains with civil support teams from other states, but admits that this particular scenario is almost impossible to train for. The scope of the pollution recovery operation is so massive, teams have to be flexible for anything.

“We were in North Dakota when the call came for us to report to Texas. With five guys absent from our team, I was able to grab five guys from the North Dakota team who fit right in with us,” said Emick. “I can’t even tell the difference - they have all done extremely well.”

The unified command plans to finalize its oversight of oil pollution recovery in the coming weeks and will continue to assist local communities with the recovery and removal of displaced hazardous material containers. It is ready to assist with any pollutants discovered during the salvage and debris-removal process.

“We’ll drive by peoples’ homes and their belongings are piled up outside because they are ruined, and they can still wave and smile at you,” added Emick. “It’s just phenomenal to see something like that.”

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FOR INFORMATION, please contact Maj. Orson Ward at (605) 737-6721, cell (605) 431-8753.

Photo Cutline:

080926-A-9937D-001: A beach home sits damaged after the storm surge from Hurricane Ike rips its foundation away along Galveston Bay, in southeast Texas on Friday, Sept. 26. Members of the 82nd Civil Support Team, South Dakota National Guard, help inspect homes like these to ensure no environmental hazards such as gas leaks or downed power lines threaten the local population. (National Guard photo by 82nd Civil Support Team) (RELEASED)

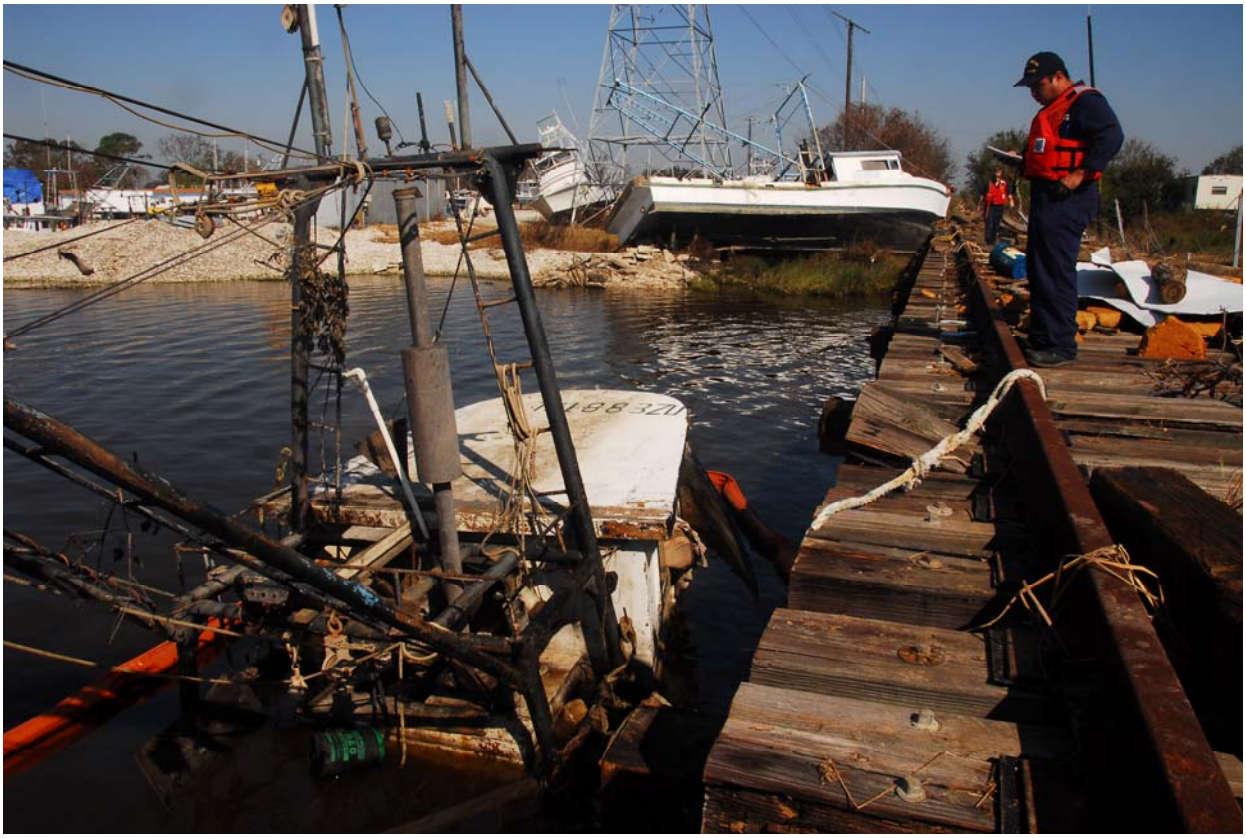
Link to photo: https://sdguard.ngb.army.mil/released/080926-A-9937D-001.jpg

080927-A-9937D-002: A setaline torch container displaced by the storm surge from Hurricane Ike sits upside down in a home in the Galveston Bay area, in southeast Texas on Friday, Sept. 26. Members of the 82nd Civil Support Team, South Dakota National Guard, inspect and mark hazardous material containers like this to ensure its contents is not leaking. (National Guard photo by 82nd Civil Support Team) (RELEASED)

Link to photo: https://sdguard.ngb.army.mil/released/080927-A-9937D-002.jpg

081002-A-9937D-001: Staff Sgt. Dave Fisher, survey team member for the 82nd Civil Support Team, South Dakota National Guard, stands atop a fuel container after inspecting and marking its contents in the Galveston Bay area of southeast Texas on Tuesday, Oct. 2. (National Guard photo by 82nd Civil Support Team) (RELEASED)

Link to photo: https://sdguard.ngb.army.mil/released/081002-A-9937D-001.jpg



081002-A-9937D-002: A marine inspector from the unified command in Pasadena, Texas, surveys a sunken vessel at a marina in Port Arthur, Texas, Sunday, Sept. 28. The Unified Command is responding to pollution and displaced hazardous material reports throughout southeast Texas in the wake of Hurricane Ike. (U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class William Mitchell) (RELEASED)

Link to photo: https://sdguard.ngb.army.mil/released/081002-A-9937D-002.jpg