

BY MAURICIO GARRIDO, PRESIDENT, AMERICAN SALVAGE ASSOCIATION

## Keeping the oil in the ship: Salvors of the environment

**“E**nvironment”: An obscure word until the early ‘80s, when most baby boomers were just mastering its spelling, is now close to joining the ranks of the top 50 sight words for preschoolers. Our marine industry has been the subject of widespread environmental awareness fueled by the ancient fact that oil and water don’t mix. Yet, the fact is that without shipping, the world would have a hard time keeping the lights on; this could easily be a Trivial Pursuit question.

In fact, but for disasters and Caribbean cruises, our industry is virtually unknown to society, especially when “USA as The Media Leader” continues to enjoy an agonizing merchant marine. So if folks are barely aware of what ships bring to the table, the role of the salvor in environmental protection may need Hollywood’s help in spreading the word.

Salvors—and the entire salvage industry—have evolved into modern-day environmental protectors. However, this evolution would not have been possible without the recognition of those who were financially exposed, who relied on salvors to prevent pollution and mitigate liability. The 1989 International Salvage Convention introduced a contractual safety net to financially cover contractors while responding to save the environment. This net was later strengthened through something called SCOPIC which continues to provide a workable framework for salvors and insurers. Our casualty response system is environment centric, and while it considers salvage response a pollution response, the pre-



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vailing culture spanning across several generations of Coast Guard leaders, is focused on recovering oil from the water rather than keeping it out. Oil booms and skimmers are graspable and visible measures, but only after the oil is already on the water.

Fortunes have been spent in research and development of oil recovery technologies and dispersant applications, while more recently the Coast Guard initiated a pre-contractual process to research the recov-

ery of submerged or sunken oils. One would think that the funding should be spent on prevention and not reaction. The focus needs to change to “Keeping the Oil in the Ship” and preventing it from reaching the environment through proven salvage techniques such as internal transfers, patching, hot-tapping and ship-to-ship transfers. Despite recent collaborative efforts with the USCG and other agencies, salvage remains on the sidelines as evidenced by the continual skipping of the listed salvor during Vessel Response Plan notifications. While Area Contingency Plans are stuffed with oil spill response data, they lack salvage information. Why have incomplete plans, or plans which are not going to be followed, much less enforced? This astigmatic view on casualty response will continue to lead regulators and stakeholders down the comfort zone where they can feel their way around like a diver in zero “vis.”

The marine salvage industry must step up its efforts to turn the lights on—and keep them shining—and to let regulators, decision-makers and ship-owners see that salvage is the best pollution prevention tool in the box. If those ultimately faced with the financial and liability burden of a spill have recognized the contribution of salvors in pollution prevention, then those charged with enforcing and penalizing should fall in line and contribute to Keeping Oil off the Sea. **ML**

[www.americansalvage.org](http://www.americansalvage.org)

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