



# *MARINE SAFETY* **UPDATE**

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## **MINIMIZING AN OIL SPILL CLEAN-UP BILL**

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You experience a sickening feeling as your vessel encounters a rock, secures itself to the bottom, and the tide flows out. Once determined that all aboard are safe and the vessel is stable, the Coast Guard becomes interested in fuel discharge. They will first contact the boat owner to see what is being done to take care of the matter. In the 50% of grounding cases where an owner cannot be reached, or if the owner is not taking care of the problem, the Coast Guard will contact an oil spill contractor to remedy the problem.

A contractor hired in this manner works for the Coast Guard, not the vessel owner. The contractor will charge the Coast Guard a standard government rate for



services. The Coast Guard, in turn, will recover this rate plus their own fees, from the boat owner. This can be mighty spendy. Clean-up of even a small spill can cost from \$60,000 to \$100,000 in a remote or environmentally sensitive area. Few recreational boaters have pollution clean-up insurance. Only about 40% of commercial fishermen have this coverage.

There are some steps that boat owners can take, however, to minimize the cost of such an event.

1. First is prevention. Many groundings result from inattention at the helm caused by many factors including fatigue. Good maintenance and a sound safety plan, including safety drills, help prevent problems.

2. If a grounding occurs, once the safety of personnel has been insured, plug fuel tank vents. These vents are the most frequent source of leakage. Plugging vents stops most leakage and buys time to get tanks pumped, holes repaired and the vessel safely afloat again.

The problem is, most tank vents are hard to plug securely. Rags and wooden plugs are not sufficient. Consider putting pipe threads on the outside of the vent, and leave a cap hanging from the vent. The vent can then be easily capped even when underwater. In shallow water, a snorkel is all the equipment needed. Brightly paint the vent so it is easily found. Vents that are quickly capped can eliminate a costly charter to town for a plug and the need for an expensive oil boom

3. The owner of a grounded vessel should hire a clean-up contractor before the Coast Guard contracts someone to take on the job. Once the Coast Guard is involved, their costs will be added to contractor costs. All costs will then appear on the bill presented to the owner.

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