Responses to questions from Rep. Huffman for Mr. Doug Helton, former Regional Operations Supervisor, Emergency Response Division, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Submitted June 3, 2025 to Jacob Greenberg, Legislative Assistant, Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources, at <u>Jacob.Greenberg@mail.house.gov</u>

Chairman Stauber and Representative Huffman:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the committee on this important issue and I appreciate the opportunity to share additional information for the record.

1. This administration is pushing to open new areas of the Arctic Ocean to offshore oil and gas drilling. As an expert on oil spill response, what would an oil spill response in the Arctic actually look like in practice? What are the unique challenges to responding to a spill in that region, both environmental and logistical? Is full recovery a realistic possibility?

Answer: Oil spill response is always challenging, but a response in the Arctic would be especially so. The scale of the Alaskan North Slope is immense, extreme weather and long winters would hinder response efforts and the logistics are very limited. Getting equipment and personnel on scene and housing those personnel would be a huge challenge. The north slope region is over 2000 miles by sea from Kodiak AK and over 1500 miles from Dutch Harbor, Alaska.

Supplies and equipment could be brought in by air but there are few villages and a very limited road system. There are no harbors for large ships, and the coastal bays can only be navigated by landing craft, barges and shallow water vessels. The response would be slow and rely on equipment already staged in the region, with crews working from small vessels, helicopters and other small aircraft.

Response efforts would also be seasonal, with most of the effort during the summer months. The most challenging time of year would be during ice formation and breakup when little or no response actions would be feasible.

Full recovery of oil is never likely during a spill. Most major spills such as the Exxon Valdez and the Deepwater Horizon oil spills had only 5 to 10% recovered.

2. What are the impacts of oil spills on fisheries, both commercial and subsistence?

The North Slope and coastal Alaskan Arctic has thousands of miles of environmentally sensitive coastline with long sand and gravel shorelines where oil could penetrate and biologically rich habitats such as marshes, sheltered tidal flats, and exposed tidal flats. The North Slope supports a number of sensitive biological resources including birds, fish and shellfish, and marine mammals. The local communities are heavily reliant on marine resources for their livelihood and subsistence. Because of this unique relationship with the marine environment, much of the coast is utilized for subsistence activities and is extremely sensitive to the impacts of marine commerce, especially oil spills.

Commercial fishing is less common in this region, but the broader commercial industry in Alaska could certainly be affected by a spill in this region. Many consumers would question the wholesomeness of Alaskan seafood in general without understanding the location in which their products are harvested. If a spill were to happen in the Bering Sea however impacts to the industry could be direct and enormous because many of the largest seafood ports in the United States are in this region.

3. H.R. 513 and H.R. 2556 would facilitate offshore oil and gas drilling in long protected areas of the U.S. Outer Continental Shelf, including the Atlantic, Pacific, 27 Alaska, and the Eastern Gulf. While the more catastrophic potential impacts of oil spills were discussed during the hearing, oil and gas drilling also involves frequent smaller-scale spills. How common are small spills, and what effects do they have on ecosystems and coastal communities?

Large oil spills like the Exxon Valdez are fortunately rare but small spills are very common. The US Coast Guard gets around 6000 or so notifications a year annually of spills in US waters, and NOAA typically responds to 150 to 200 of the larger more complicated incidents. Offshore oil and gas development requires specialized vessels, tugs, barges crew boats, and other work boats and these annually contribute to a number of small spills. These vessels need to be fueled and maintained and the supporting port infrastructure, including refineries, tank farms and pipelines, all add to the risk of small operational spills. Cumulatively these small spills can be harmful to coastal ecosystems.

4. Is there anything else you would like to add for the record?

Much of the focus of offshore oil and gas development is on the risks from exploration and production, but still responders also need to be prepared for transportation related incidents. A substantial fraction of the US crude oil production, as well as refined products, is exported. The great circle shipping routes for the West Coast and Alaska goes through the Aleutians to Asia.

In the near future, routes may go through the Arctic. These are remote areas with limited marine salvage and rescue capacity. Rescue tugs may be days or weeks away. Even a small mechanical breakdown of a tanker may quickly escalate into a major marine casualty. Responders need to consider the likely shipping routes and the risks inherent in those routes.

In recent years, the U.S. has produced record amounts of oil offshore, and this administration wants to expand that. The proposed bills will increase production without recognition of the increased risk of spills. And we are going in the wrong direction.

Planning and preparedness for spills big and small has been substantially impaired with the recent cuts to NOAA budgets and staffing. The frequency and risk of spills has not declined, but NOAA's response team is now much smaller, with major gaps in coverage in California, Texas, and the Great Lakes. The remaining team is now facing contracting, hiring, budget, travel and procurement roadblocks that are making it harder to do the work. The team that remains, working even harder to fulfill the mission, is soon expecting to see further reductions in force. Key contracts are not being renewed. Sooner or later, the public will feel this. These changes are seriously harming our national preparedness for managing oil spills.