LEE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT'S OIL SPILL PREPARATIONS EXPAND

LEE COUNTY, FL, JUNE 24, 2010: Experts all agree that the potential for Deepwater Horizon oil to wash ashore in Lee County is very low; still Emergency Management officials are expanding preparedness plans to include the purchase of up to five shallow water skimmers to allow advanced training time for boaters contracted to do cleanup.

The most likely threat expected in Lee County is from tar balls and tar patties hitting our beaches and entering our mangrove areas, said John Wilson, Director of Lee County Public Safety. He believes it's prudent to move ahead with this segment of the plan to assure the public the county is doing everything it can with its current resources and to prepare for what an oil spill event may do to the community.

"Booming in shallow waters and in back bay areas appear to have had a mixed success record," said Wilson. "Most of the skimming operations are also done in the near shore area (off the beaches) and not in back bays."

Wilson is currently deployed in Tallahassee and slated to go to Alabama, as part of the State Emergency Response Team. He expects to learn if any additional revisions are needed in Lee County's plan.

The local Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan relies upon the strategy in the U. S. Coast Guard's St. Petersburg Area Contingency Plan to protect Lee coastlines from the effects of the oil. That strategy requires action when a threatening amount of oil crosses a line 94 miles west of Lee shores.

The Area Contingency Plan calls for placing boom to deflect oil from environmentally sensitive areas such as mangroves, nesting areas, and sheltered tidal flats. It directs the oil to areas where it can be easily captured and removed, such as beaches.

The shallow water skimmers are used to scoop up weathered oil, such as tar balls, in these sensitive areas. Crowder Gulf, Lee County's contract agent for the cleanup, says they can be used along with inexpensive air curtains, which bubble up weathered oil located just below the water's surface for easier identification and removal.

The equipment is expected to cost up to $12,000 per unit, and will be obtained using funds currently available in Public Safety's budget.