

Coast Guard's response to oil spill illustrates deeper problems in the agency: An editorial

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Metro New Orleans residents will always be grateful for the heroic performance of the U.S. Coast Guard after Hurricane Katrina. Even before tropical force winds subsided, its pilots began rescuing thousands of people, mostly New Orleanians stranded after the levee failures. That was the Coast Guard at its best, and its phenomenal service stood out amid a shameful federal response.

South Louisianians have a different opinion of the Coast Guard's job as the federal agency in charge of responding to **the BP oil spill**.

The agency has been tepid at times, and that has delayed cleanup efforts. The performance of some federal officials, including Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen, has often left the public wondering whether the Coast Guard or BP is in charge. The Coast Guard's emergency plans for a spill were inadequate, assuming as a worst-case scenario a finite spill like the 1989 Exxon Valdez in Alaska. The ongoing spill caught the agency flat-footed.

The agency's problems handling the spill may also reflect a broader problem. After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the Coast Guard's national security portfolio was expanded considerably. Aside from traditional duties, including search and rescue, aiding navigation and enforcing fisheries and environmental laws, the Coast Guard now provides security at more than 300 ports, patrols about 95,000 miles of coastline and supports military command overseas.

That has left the Coast Guard stretched thin. The agency, for example, was ordered in 2004 to crack down on barge operators that were overlooking safety rules. But the Coast Guard was slow in creating regulations and lacked resources to appropriately enforce them, leaving

the industry to police itself. Those deficiencies were exposed by the July 2008 collision between a barge and a ship that caused a 280,000-gallon oil spill in the Mississippi River at New Orleans, shutting down the waterway for days.

Further evidence of the Coast Guard's strain came this week, when **Adm. Robert Papp**, the agency's commandant, **worried about the limited number of reservists available for the BP oil spill response**. Many Coast Guard reservists have already been called to the Gulf or have been tied up in national security missions overseas.

Adm. Papp said he is forming a panel to draw lessons from the BP spill response. That's good. But that discussion should also examine whether the Coast Guard should remain in charge of responding to this type of disaster in the future.

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