

Update as of 1200, July 15, 2023

Stillwater Train Derailment Press Release

Reed Point, Montana (July 15, 2023) – 12:00pm

Response teams continue daily river operations for asphalt material cleanup on the Yellowstone River. Most of the material has been found on river islands, and a few back channels and riverbanks. Operations will likely continue for weeks as efforts progress downriver.

The cleanup operation involves a variety of crews. First is an assessment crew which scouts the river for actionable asphalt and maps the locations on the river. Actionable asphalt is defined as material that can be efficiently removed with less than 30% rock and sediment from land or can be collected in one piece from the water with no sediment or rock. The assessment teams also map out critical habitat, such as eagle nesting locations and turtle habitat, to alert the cleanup crews to avoid damaging them. The second is a cleanup group that removes the asphalt material (typically by hand) and bags it for collection. A third group transports the collected waste material back to a central staging area. These efforts are all supported by a water safety team. The work is labor intensive and needs to be done meticulously to be effective. Safety is top priority.

To date, Holmgren Fishing Access Site has been a hub for cleanup and assessment efforts due to its size and location; approximately 26 boats and 100 staff are supporting river operations though daily numbers vary. As cleanup crews move downriver, the response team is mobilizing alternate launch and storage locations so teams don't have to travel to Holmgren to access boats or drop off material.

A typical day in the cleanup operations is detailed below:

Boats are currently launching out of Holmgren at 3:45 a.m. so cleanup crews can meet them downriver and take off at 5 a.m.

Teams observed that it's more efficient to focus on the asphalt material in the morning and debris collection, railroad ties, in the afternoon.

Cleanup teams are currently focused on river miles 18.5-25.5 while assessment teams are 41-51 miles downstream today.

Assessment crews are checking shores, including islands in the river, for mats of asphalt material. Assessment crews flag areas of "actionable" asphalt material that can be removed, in addition to areas where removing the asphalt would cause more damage to the environment than good (nesting locations etc).

In areas where asphalt is observed but it isn't feasible to remove the material, the cleanup crews will break the asphalt material up into smaller pieces and cover it with sand or soil to aid the natural breakdown process and reduce the risk of animals getting physically stuck.

After cleanup crews have completed an area, the assessment crews return to review if additional cleanup is needed or if the area can be cleared.

Assessment and cleanup plans for the site are available on EPA's website under Documents and Removal Guidelines: https://response.epa.gov/site/doc_list.aspx?site_id=16083

The cleanup teams return to Holmgren at about 5 p.m. Approximately 96,147 pounds of material have been collected as of Friday night.

Challenges:

One of the difficulties at this stage in the collection process is material transit. Transport boats are running up and down the river to bring collected material back to Holmgren where the material is weighed and stored. Sometimes material that's been collected during the day isn't weighed on the same day based on logistical challenges with getting the material to the weighing station. Logistics teams are working on moving drop locations as the cleanup effort continues to move downriver. Heat also poses a challenge on two fronts; it softens the asphalt material and can lead to heat stress. Cleanup teams have plenty of water and temporary shade shelters are being placed on sand bars after two crew members experienced heat related illness. Operations have shifted to adjust to maximize the cooler part of the day (before 2:30 – 3:00 p.m.) for asphalt material cleanup.

Fishing Access and Parks:

Unified Command and Fish Wildlife & Parks are working to reopen the Holmgren Fishing Access Site to the public as soon as safety conditions improve. The boat ramp at Itch-Kep-Pe Park in Columbus remains closed to the public. The hand-launch boat ramp near the Highway 78 bridge will still be available for smaller watercraft use, and the campground will remain open. Assessment teams began launching from Buffalo Mirage outside of Laurel this week. River operations teams anticipate using the Laurel Riverside Park launch area as their next base of operations as they move downstream. For updated information on Fish Wildlife & Parks access closures and restrictions, visit: <https://fwp.mt.gov/news/current-closures-restrictions/waterbody-closures>

The cleanup and assessment crews continue to look for impacted wildlife daily. The killdeer chick that was taken to the Montana Raptor Conservation Center in Bozeman passed away. There are currently nine confirmed animals that died after encountering the asphalt material.

EPA's river operations dashboard on the incident website has up-to-date information on the amount of collected asphalt material and assessment locations and is available online: <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/719ee8d6c1d743e89b95ee946d1d4d45/page/River-Operations/>

Members of the public are encouraged to continue avoiding touching the asphalt material with bare skin and reporting it to the email below. This email can also be used for any impacted landowners to start the process of filing a claim. To report observed asphalt material, submit information

to: rpderailment@mtrail.com

Anyone with information about oiled wildlife are encouraged to call the Oiled Wildlife Care Network (OWCN) Response Hotline at 888-ASK-OWCN (888-275-6926).

For more information, please visit the response websites

at: <https://response.epa.gov/stillwatertrainderailment>

<https://www.stillwatercountymt.gov/train-derailment/>

This response is operating under a Unified Command which enables different jurisdictions and organizations to jointly manage and direct incident activities. Unified Command for this incident is comprised of representatives from Stillwater County Disaster and Emergency Services, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Montana Rail Link.