

Introduction

Latvia is situated between Lithuania to the south and Estonia to the north on the east coast of the Baltic. The Russian Federation and Belarus form its eastern border. Of the country's 490 km of coastline, 308 km is along the Gulf of Riga, a semi-enclosed bay shared with Estonia. The Gulf of Riga and the busy Irbe Strait, which is the main route into and out of the gulf for vessel traffic, are important wintering sites for waterbirds.

Other significant bird areas include the North Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve, Slitere National Park and Engure Nature Park marine protected areas, in addition to coastal stretches from Nida to Perkone, Ziemupe to Riva, Salacgriva to Vitrupe and in Western Offing near the Lithuanian border.

At Risk Wildlife

Avian Species - the Gulf of Riga and Irebe Strait are important overwintering areas for water birds, which are found in high numbers in autumn and winter. Breeding birds of concern include the velvet scoter, Steller's and common eider, long-tailed duck, black-tailed godwit, Terek sandpiper, ruff and southern dunlin.

Marine mammals - three species of marine mammal, grey and ringed seals and harbour porpoise, are found in Latvian waters. The Eurasian otter, a coastal species which sometimes feeds in the intertidal zone, may also be at risk from oil spills reaching the shore.

Marine Reptiles - sea turtles are not regularly found in this region.

Regional Seas

Baltic Sea

Past experience

No major oil spills have been reported in Latvian waters, however small spills resulting from pipeline leaks and oil handling operations occur each year. The country has experienced several HNS incidents, one in 2007 when the Golden Sky spilled muriate of potash, and one in 2009 when an uncontrolled chemical reaction occurred in the port of Riga releasing acetonic cyanohydrin. No oil or HNS incidents have involved significant numbers of wildlife.

Response: the role of the authorities

A new National Oil and Chemical Spill Contingency Plan was approved in 2010. The Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development (State Environmental Service) is the competent national authority charged with implementing the plan, including wildlife response. The Latvian Coast Guard Service (part of the Latvian Naval forces under the Ministry of Defence) has the responsibility for spills in marine waters and works in co-operation with the Marine and Inland Waters Administration on environmental protection. The Fire Fighting and Rescue Service (under the Ministry of the Interior) has responsibility for shoreline and beach clean-up in cooperation with local authorities.

Oiled wildlife response

Formal guidelines?

Responsible authorities in oiled wildlife response are stated in the National Civil Protection Plan. National authorities and relevant NGOs have jointly prepared the Guidelines for Oiled Wildlife Care at Marine and Inland Water Oil Spills. These plans and guidelines have not been tested in a spill situation. In 2014 as part of the BALEX Delta exercise in Latvia, the collection of oiled animals was exercised on a small scale.

Response objectives and strategy

The oiled wildlife response objectives and strategy are under discussion. See below.

Euthanasia or rehabilitation?

Euthanasia is planned to be utilised on a case-by-case basis on animal welfare grounds when successful rehabilitation is unlikely.

Impact assessment

The National Preparedness Plan includes wording on assessment of damage to the environment.

Notification and early response

SES maintains a list of trained responders from a 2009 workshop, however, none have had direct experience of working at an oiled wildlife response and it is not clear how responders would be activated. In 2020 Latvia began to renew its list of volunteers to be ready to respond in case of an accident.

Wildlife responders

Several NGOs have expressed interest in cooperative oiled wildlife response within the Baltic Region, with WWF Latvia indicating an interest in taking the lead on this project should it go forward. Other NGOs and government agencies expressing interest include Latvian Fund for Nature, Riga Zoo and the Latvian Nature Conservation Agency. On request, several scientific centres could provide information. The Latvian Environment, Geology and Meteorology Agency is responsible for environmental monitoring and oversees the work of the Institute for Aquatic Ecology (University of Latvia), including the State Program for Marine Monitoring. Results of the monitoring project are reported to HELCOM. These entities will likely oversee the evaluation of the environmental impact of a spill. The Institute of Biology (University of Latvia) is involved in bird ringing and monitoring. The Latvian Nature Conservation Agency, a government agency more heavily involved in terrestrial and fresh water conservation, but doing some work on limiting environmental pollution as part of the BaltCICA project.

Cooperation between stakeholders

The national authorities and the Latvian Ornithological Society and other NGOs have worked together in developing baseline oiled wildlife response plans and guidelines. As no significant spills have occurred, cooperation during an event remains to be tested.

There is cooperation between Latvian and Estonian authorities on oil spill response, suggesting that similar cooperation could occur between the NGOs of these two countries.

Latvia is a member of HELCOM.

Permanent facilities

No specialised permanent oiled wildlife rescue/rehabilitation facilities exist.

Riga Zoo has expressed interest in oiled wildlife response as part of a Baltic network but neither organisation has experience with oiled wildlife.

Current processes

Latvian NGOs and government agencies have expressed interest in the potential for a cooperative Baltic Region oiled wildlife response system, should this process move forward.

Documentation and references

General references

General references

ITOPF Profile

Birdlife International

Baltic Breeding Birds (HELCOM)

Baltic Marine Mammals (HELCOM)

HELCOM Redlist

Report on the first stage of the development of the Baltic Sea Oiled Wildlife Rehabilitators group (Sea Alarm 2014)

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LATVIA

*Country Wildlife Response Profiles
A Summary of oiled wildlife response
arrangements and resources worldwide*

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