The movement towards integrating oiled wildlife response planning in national oil spill contingency plans is gaining momentum in Europe. On a regional level, the Baltic coastal countries have recently taken a number of significant steps in this direction. In support of these developments, Sea Alarm Foundation has organized both regional and national meetings, and will continue to play an advisory role where needed.

The adoption of the Baltic Sea Action Plan marks the beginning of the process of implementing oiled wildlife response plans in the Baltic coastal countries. Signed on 15 November 2007 at the HELCOM Ministerial Meeting, in Krakow, Poland, the action plan sets the political agenda for environmental policies in the years to come. The action plan’s overarching vision is to drastically reduce pollution in the Baltic Sea and restore its good ecological status by 2021, and has been adopted by Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Sweden, and the European Union.

Following the ministerial meeting, the Ninth Meeting of the HELCOM Response Group was held in Lisbon, Portugal, from 12-14 December 2007. Hugo Nijkamp, of Sea Alarm Foundation, was an invited guest at the Meeting and was asked to report on the status of oiled wildlife preparedness and response in Europe. The Group discussed how to proceed with this new issue in their working programme and decided to start evaluating current policies and activities in each of the HELCOM States. It was agreed that Estonia and WWF would lead the work on this initiative; they will conduct an evaluation and present their findings at the Tenth Meeting of the Response Group, scheduled for 29-31 October 2008.

OILED WILDLIFE RESPONSE IN THE BALTIC SEA ACTION PLAN

The Baltic Sea Action Plan defines environmental aims and measures in a multitude of areas, including those important to the shipping industry. Emergency response and preparedness is included in the action plan, and one of the most striking elements is the decision to integrate the subject of oiled wildlife response and shoreline response into oil pollution contingency plans. This recognition of the relevance of oiled wildlife response and preparedness on a regional level is indeed a breakthrough in Europe.

These developments, combined with the apparent need for more in-depth information, prompted WWF-Finland and Sea Alarm to jointly organize a regional training event on oiled wildlife response and planning.

Hosted by the Finnish Environmental Institute (SYKE), the Porvoo Rescue Centre, and WWF-Finland, the training workshop was held in Helsinki on 17-19 March 2008. The workshop brought together 35 participants from six Baltic coastal countries and Norway, as well as experts from the United States, Belgium and the United Kingdom. The first day of the workshop provided an overview of oiled wildlife response and planning, and included presentations on the current state of wildlife response in each Baltic State that was represented at the meeting. The second day was devoted to technical training, and participants learned more about the treatment of oiled animals, animal welfare issues, and the use of temporary and permanent response centers. Emphasis was placed on mobile response units, which included an excursion to the newly designed Finnish mobile unit. A tabletop exercise, simulating the early hours of an oiled wildlife incident, was held on the third day. This exercise, which ended in a mock press conference, stimulated realistic discussions about the challenges faced in a developing wildlife incident. Having agreed upon a number of follow-up activities, all participants left Helsinki with a greater understanding of the key issues involved in oiled wildlife response.
On 4 April 2008, a national stakeholder meeting was held in Stockholm, Sweden. The meeting was organized by Sea Alarm, in collaboration with Djurskyddet Sverige (the Swedish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals). Key stakeholders from rehabilitation organisations and government bodies were brought together, with the view of discussing how to increase oiled wildlife response and preparedness in Sweden. The discussions were fruitful and laid the foundation for constructive cooperation between stakeholders in Sweden.

The insight gained from these recent meetings in the Baltic region will undoubtedly be beneficial to other European countries undergoing similar processes. As oiled wildlife issues are increasingly brought to the fore, Sea Alarm will continue to be a driving force behind the movement, initiating and facilitating oiled wildlife response planning throughout Europe.

FEBRUARY 2008 MYSTERY SPILL IN GERMANY

Sea Alarm manages a 24/7 emergency service for oiled wildlife response incidents. In February 2008, Sea Alarm was notified of an oil spill taking place in Germany whereby oil from an unknown source was affecting hundreds of coastal birds. Local capacity in Germany was stretched, and Sea Alarm’s assistance was requested. To help alleviate the limited capacity of the local facilities, more than 250 of the oiled birds were transported to the Netherlands for treatment. Sea Alarm assisted the wildlife responders with the coordination of this response. Additionally, Sea Alarm arranged for two bird cleaning and rehabilitation experts from Belgium to spend more than a week on site in Germany to assist local responders. Thanks to this intervention, the majority of the 60 birds that were treated in Germany could be rehabilitated and released.