



# WCMRC's remarkable transformation

By Captain Stephen Brown  
West Pacific Marine

Having operated successfully for many years from its headquarters off Kensington Avenue in Burnaby, the remarkable transformation of Western Canada Marine Response Corp. (WCMRC) over the past five years has inevitably resulted in a demand for more space from which to operate. The organization therefore expanded into new and well-appointed corporate offices in January 2017, permitting the Kensington Avenue site to be dedicated to operations with the new offices on Gilmore Way, also in Burnaby, devoted to corporate leadership and support.

I recently had the opportunity to sit down with Michael Lowry, Communications Manager for WCMRC at the new offices to discuss ongoing developments and to gain an understanding of the current direction and priorities. It was clear at the outset that WCMRC looks back upon such incidents as that of the *Marathassa* leakage of oily water into English Bay in 2014 and the grounding of the tug *Nathan E. Stewart* (along with barge) in 2016 with a sense of professional pride in the role played by the organization in preventing potentially far worse incidents of pollution.

Michael disclosed that the organization currently stands at 80 full-time employees, of which 40 are based in the Gilmore Way office and the remaining staff stationed at various response bases in Northern B.C. and Vancouver Island. To bring WCMRC up to full strength for its objectives, there remains 120 positions to be filled over the next couple of years, no small task given the high standards demanded by the company.

While Area Response Planning (ARP) pilot projects — as recommended by the Tanker Safety Panel in 2014 — continue to be progressed, WCMRC is also anticipating to be further engaged in the development of the current Federal Government's Oceans Protection Plan (OPP). WCMRC

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sees it as important to ensure there is harmonization of the initiatives and objectives of the OPP while itself continuing to develop highly detailed Geographical Response Strategies (GRS), some 400 of which are already complete, many with the assistance of local First Nations and coastal communities. The GRS will be supported by strategically placed equipment that is identified as crucial to a first response capability. The ultimate aim is to have GRSs covering the entire B.C. coastline.

In terms of expanded coverage, Michael enthusiastically took me through the current growth plan. New response bases are scheduled for Burrard Inlet in the Port of Vancouver, on the Fraser River, and on Vancouver Island in the ports of Nanaimo and Port Alberni/Ucluelet, along with new stations at Sydney on the Saanich Peninsula and at Beecher Bay in the Juan de Fuca Strait. Figure 1 is intended to show the makeup of the response capability to be stationed at each location but also of significance is WCMRC's plan to acquire a suitable off-shore supply vessel of around 200 feet in length to be stationed at Ogden Point, Victoria. The obvious advantage of such a vessel is to have deep sea collection and storage capability in support of spill response wherever it might occur.

Already on order however, are three 25-metre, Robert Allan-designed BRAvo 2500 all-weather offshore response vessels to be built in Singapore (see article on Page 31). With a permanent crew of three to four (and accommodation for eight), these 278-GRT vessels will offer an enhanced response capability to Nanaimo, Alberni/Ucluelet and the Beecher Bay stations.



Michael Lowry, Communications Manager, WCMRC

With respect to the new base in the Port of Vancouver, a project permit was issued to WCMRC in May this year. Construction is expected to commence by November and be complete by summer 2018 as an integral component in the expansion planned to meet enhanced response requirements associated with the Trans Mountain / Kinder Morgan expansion. As part of the project, WCMRC was engaged by Trans Mountain to review the project's risk assessment and spill modelling studies, and recommend enhancements to the existing federal spill response planning standards for B.C. WCMRC developed a draft equipment plan that would then be capable of meeting the enhanced planning standards as part of the facilities application to the National Energy Board for the project. In

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addition to hosting Vancouver Fire and Rescue Services' new fireboats, the base will be a permanent operations centre for the majority of WCMRC equipment based in Burrard Inlet.

Of course, none of this can be achieved without funding, given that WCMRC is expecting to more than double overall response capacity including 24/7/365 coverage in several key locations such as the Port of Vancouver and elsewhere. Kinder Morgan's commitment to an investment of \$150 million in WCMRC, assuming the now-approved pipeline capacity expansion proceeds, will therefore cover the described expansion costs. There is certainly no time to spare given that the objective is to complete the current phase of WCMRC upgrades at least six months prior to completion of the Kinder Morgan expansion and before the increase of marine traffic intended to serve the new terminal is seen on the coast. That aside, WCMRC sees these investments in defence of all B.C. coastal shipping as being essential if WCMRC is to achieve its goal of having the capacity to clean up 20,000 tonnes of oil in 10 days within the Strait of Juan de

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Fuca shipping lanes, double the statutory requirement demanded by Transport Canada since inauguration of Canada's current spill response regime in 1995.

In addition to expanding the in-house staff complement, WCMRC has long-standing contractual support arrangements with many contractors and advisors based on their capacity, experience and expertise. The key to harnessing these strengths is, of course, communication and as we all discover at some stage in our careers, good communication comes through experience. Exercises are therefore essential, one recent such event being held in June this year in the waters between North Pender Island and Saturna Island. A simulated oil spill involved 90 personnel spread over 20 vessels including skimmers, work boats with booms and barges to hold the simulated recovery of 2,500 tonnes of oil from Plumper Sound. In this context, WCMRC is keen to

promote contractor and community training in the so-called Shore Line Clean-Up Assessment Technique (SCAT). This is a comprehensive approach to provide timely information on shore-line contamination in various environments. The important objective of SCAT training is to deliver an accurate on-site perspective to the Response Team to allow for implementation of environmentally sound and cost-effective response and to ensure an overall long-term net environmental benefit.

Inevitably, the rapid expansion of WCMRC, supported by heavy industry investment, runs the risk of raising the expectations of the public at large to an unrealistic level. WCMRC is therefore at pains to point out that despite no effort being spared to prevent oil spills occurring in the first place, and no stone being left unturned to ensure preparedness for a spill (however unlikely an occurrence may be), no oil spill is without



Figure 1 — New stations along the entire B.C. coast will expand WCMRC's capabilities.





The Kaien Sentinel, one of WCMRC's large landing craft, is based in Prince Rupert.

Photo courtesy WCMRC

consequence. Michael likened response to a spill to that of response to a forest fire, so many of which we have seen across British Columbia this past summer. Speed of response, the right equipment operated by well-trained personnel and overwhelming capacity are seen as the basic ingredients for success.

Another area of discussion was that of embracing technology in spill response. We have for some time been aware that the use of drones in spill surveillance has become a preferred option but WCMRC currently favours the use of surveillance balloons. This technology uses a helium filled balloon carrying both infrared and conventional cameras tethered to a vessel. The spill surveillance balloon is positioned about 500 feet in the air

as a supplement to aircraft and helicopter over-flights during a response. Michael also spoke to the use of infra-red cameras and highly successful new designs of skimming systems like the Current Busters which can handle heavier weather and be towed at higher speeds.

It is also worth noting that for almost 20 years, WCMRC has offered scholarships to students of family members involved in spill response on the West Coast. In the current year, three \$1,000 scholarships were awarded to students who are enrolled in a post-secondary program for the 2017/2018 academic year. Selection is based on the applicant's academic performance, education and career goals, as well as their community and extracurricular involvement.

Of course, no successful organization can go forever without attention to branding. The entire WCMRC fleet is being upgraded with new paint jobs, the emphasis being on orange and blue with the words "Spill Response" clearly painted on the hull. Standardized naming of vessels is also underway with all vessels in the response fleet in future featuring the word *Sentinel* to reflect the role played by WCMRC in protecting the BC coastline:

- With the exception of the *MJ Green* and *GM Penman*, skimming class vessels will be named after bodies of water along the West Coast. Examples are *Eagle Bay Sentinel*, *Salish Sentinel*, etc.
- Large landing craft are to be named after Islands. Examples are *Cortes Sentinel*, *Discovery Sentinel*, etc.
- Coastal response vessels (large workboats) are to be named after features to be found on nautical charts while small workboats, boom skiffs and barges will continue to be identified by their existing number series.

There can be no doubt that WCMRC means business and is being provided with the resources to more than fulfill its mandate. This is good news for the entire Pacific Northwest as we strive to provide reassurance to coastal communities that while we are serious in preventing incidents of pollution, we have the means to respond aggressively should an incident occur.

*Captain Stephen Brown spent 21 years at sea where he served as Master for the last five years with Gearbulk Shipping. After coming ashore, he worked in various levels of operational management before going on to serve as Chamber of Shipping of BC Director (2000 to 2008) and President (2008 to 2016). Captain Brown is currently the owner of West Pacific Marine Ltd., Marine Consultancy and can be reached at westpacificmarine@gmail.com.*

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