

# Fresh look

## New Coast Guard center to study impact of oil spills

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In 2018, Michigan Senator Gary Peters passed legislation into law establishing the Great Lakes Coast Guard Center of Expertise, headquartered in Michigan.

The center will study impacts of oil spills in freshwater environments and will be partnering with Lake Superior State University in Sault Ste. Marie, which will be the location of the center and home to its supervisor, the Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory in Ann Arbor.

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# Center

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The goal of the work is to study how oil spills impact freshwater environments and help develop effective responses, as current oil spill response technologies are primarily designed for saltwater environments.

"Lake Superior State University is honored for many important reasons to be chosen as the hub for the U.S. Coast Guard National Center of Expertise for the Great Lakes and as the home to its supervisor," LSSU President Rodney Hanley said in an October press release.

"This opportunity will provide important real-world, hands-on teaching and learning for students, faculty, and staff in our School of Natural Resources and Environment and, as importantly, underwrite several research positions at our cutting-edge \$14 million Richard and Theresa Barch Center for Freshwater Research and Education facility (which opened in December 2021)."

The center will focus on different aspects of the Coast Guard's marine safety mission, including liquefied natural gas transport, the outer continental shelf, towing vessels, and investigations, among others.

It is also responsible for:

- Identifying gaps in Great Lakes oil spill research, including providing assessments of major scientific or technological deficiencies in responses to past spills in the Great Lakes and other freshwater bodies — and seeking to fill those gaps — as well as monitoring and assessing the current state of knowledge regarding freshwater oil spill response technologies

- Conducting research, development, testing and evaluation for freshwater oil spill response equipment, technologies and techniques to mitigate and respond to oil spills in the Great Lakes

- Helping train first responders on the federal, state and local level on the incident command structure system and response technologies and strategies

- Working with academic and the private sector to develop and standardize maritime oil spill response training.

For Great Lakes advocates in the region, the center is good news. Jennifer McKay, policy director for Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council, serves on the Northern Michigan Area Committee, which is co-led by the Coast Guard and Environmental Protection Agency and serves to address emergency response for the northern area.

McKay said the majority of oil spills have happened in saltwater environments, which is why research on the impacts of an oil spill in freshwater environments is lacking. The expertise center aims to understand the impacts before a major oil spill occurs.

"It's particularly critical because all along, the Coast Guard has acknowledged that we do not have the appropriate capabilities to address oil spills in open waters like the Great Lakes," she said. "That is not only from Line 5, but also from other events such as oil spills from the freighters and barges that pass through the Great Lakes. We also learned that lesson firsthand with the Line 6B spill that happened in Kalamazoo that we were not prepared for."

Due to COVID-19, the Coast Guard had to delay a decision on site location and formal establishment of the center, until recently when a location was deter-

mined as a result of support from Peters.

"The Great Lakes are more than just an economic engine and ecological treasure: they are simply in our DNA as Michiganders. An oil spill in the Great Lakes would be catastrophic for Michigan and the country — that's why we must do everything possible to protect them for future generations and improve our preparedness," Peters, a member of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, said in a

February press release.

"I worked to establish the Center of Expertise to better prepare against any potential oil spill in freshwater environments, and I'm pleased that it will be based in Michigan," he said. "The Center of Expertise will lead the way on the research and testing of freshwater oil spill response technology and I will continue working to ensure we have the resources to help keep the Great Lakes safe from disaster."