



# At a Glance

*Catalyst for Improving the Environment*

## Why We Did This Review

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) evaluated the effectiveness of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) oversight of the Gulf Coast oil spill waste management plans and activities. Our objective was to determine whether the plans and activities for tracking and transporting oil-contaminated waste effectively provided a full accounting of the volume and disposition of waste.

## Background

On April 20, 2010, Deepwater Horizon, an offshore rig drilling oil for the BP America Production Company, exploded approximately 50 miles off the coast of Louisiana, causing large quantities of oil to spill into the Gulf of Mexico. As of June 19, 2011, over 626 million pounds of waste from the spill had been disposed of on land.

**For further information, contact our Office of Congressional and Public Affairs at (202) 566-2391.**

**The full report is at:**  
[www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2011/20110926-11-P-0706.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2011/20110926-11-P-0706.pdf)

## ***EPA Should Clarify and Strengthen Its Waste Management Oversight Role With Respect to Oil Spills of National Significance***

### **What We Found**

As a support agency to the Coast Guard, EPA's oversight of the Gulf Coast oil spill waste management activities provided assurance that oil-contaminated waste was disposed of properly. EPA helped shape the federal government's requirements for BP's waste management activities during the Gulf Coast oil spill. EPA had a key role in reviewing and approving BP's waste management plans. EPA also conducted assessments of landfills to ensure that waste could be safely disposed, independently sampled waste, and kept the public informed about its oversight activities and results. The Gulf Coast oil spill was the first to be designated a "Spill of National Significance," and as such, the increased federal oversight of BP's waste management activities increased transparency and provided additional measures to protect the environment and public health.

EPA can be better prepared to respond to future Spills of National Significance. At the time of the spill, EPA did not have adequate waste management guidance for a spill of this magnitude in place. In part, this was due to limitations in the oil spill response regulations, which do not specifically address Spills of National Significance, as well as incomplete response plans. EPA fell short of its own goals for waste management oversight and did not conduct oversight for all states and facilities that received waste. In addition, EPA's lack of planning and transparency on its decision to manage the oil spill waste in a manner different than provided by guidance resulted in staff confusion, frustration, and inefficiency. Although we obtained no evidence that there were negative effects from these limitations, some delay in the disposal of the waste did occur.

### **What We Recommend**

We recommend that EPA, using lessons learned in response to this spill: work with other federal partners to determine whether the National Contingency Plan and National Response Framework for waste management oversight and roles should be updated; complete waste management guidance in Area Contingency Plans; develop a model waste management plan; and, to the extent needed, seek additional authorities to perform waste management oversight in offshore Spills of National Significance. We also recommend that EPA update the 2002 guidance on the oil and gas exploration and production waste exemption. EPA has taken action on some recommendations, disagreed with others, and will need to fully respond to other recommendations in its final response to this report. We revised recommendations 1 and 3 in response to Agency comments. These recommendations are unresolved with resolution efforts in progress.