

# Researching Petroleum Spill Incidents



by Steven Winkley,  
*Water Resources Planning Specialist*

Each year, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) receives approximately 16,000 reports of chemical releases (i.e. spills, leaks, discharges) to the environment. These releases are reported to NYSDEC through its Spill Response Program and its toll-free number spills hotline (1-800-457-7362). While most of these releases involve petroleum products, the materials range from unknown substances to sewage to even cooking grease.

By law, all spills of petroleum should be reported to the Spills Hotline within two hours of discovery. The exception is a petroleum spill that meets all of the following: the spill is less than five gallons, the spill is fully contained, the spill has not and will not reach any land (other than asphalt or concrete), and the spill is cleaned up within two hours of discovery.

The NYSDEC Spill Response Program maintains an extensive online database of spill incidents that dates back to the 1970's. This searchable database can be accessed at <http://www.dec.ny.gov/cfmx/extapps/derexternal/> by clicking on the appropriate link.

As part of source water protection planning, I routinely search for spill data through the online database. The spills data can be quite useful in identifying the historical and ongoing threats within protection areas. Based upon years of using the database, the most common types of spills that I typically see are (in no particular order): releases from traffic accidents, spills at gasoline stations, failures due to equipment or human error involving residential home heating oil, and leaks from electrical transformers and circuit breakers.

Once a spill has been investigated by NYSDEC, a decision is made as to whether site cleanup and remedial activities are needed. If no further work is necessary, a spill case is then closed. This spill status can also be found online. In some instances, a spill can remain open many years after the initial date that the NYSDEC was first notified. This may indicate that site cleanup and/or monitoring continues.

If you would like more information about spills and the spills database, please let me know. 💧