

# Six-man team specializes in cleaning up spills

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Herald Staff

The call can come any time of the day or night. When it does, a six-man team hops in their truck and hurries to the scene. It's crucial that they respond quickly. The environment depends on it.

They are the Halton Hills Emergency Spills Response Team and their job is to make sure citizens, and the sensitive ecosystem, aren't threatened by chemical spills throughout town.

Formed in 1985, the spills response team expanded from three to six men last January. Their job is to monitor the many storm sewer outfalls and catch basins throughout town and to clean up any of the smaller spills that need attention.

Ken Robinson, Dick Spear, Keith Smiley, Bob Fendley, Bob Clark

and Don Swackhamer are the men in the yellow truck - donated by the town's fire department - that passers-by often see cleaning up on the side of the road.

The whole team is co-ordinated by town general works superintendent Frank Morette.

"It's still in its infancy right now," Mr. Morette says of the team. "We deal with the minor spills. Halton Region are the leaders. They've been trained to handle the (bigger) spills."

When the report comes in of a spill, the town's team responds first. If the job is more than they can handle, the extensive resources of Halton Region are called in.

Late last year, a diesel truck tipped over on the Fifth Line north of Limehouse. There were 7,700 litres of diesel fuel to contain and clean

up. The Halton Hills team was able to contain the spill, by blocking off culverts and any other areas where the liquid might flow, so that the Halton Region team was able to clean up the fuel with minimal damage to the environment.

The most common spills are gasoline, diesel gas and hydraulic fluid, Mr. Morette says.

Often the team is just called for a "washdown" of fuel from a road, but their actions in the first minutes after a spill are responsible for saving the plantlife and fish which inhabit the town's streams and rivers.

In one spill, gasoline entered a storm sewer through the catch basin. That's when you might smell gas in the house. If you do, you know Halton Hills response team is at work trying to clean up the gas.

The gas worked its way through the sewer system and came out in a settling pond, said Mr. Morette. It took three days to clean up the whole mess.

"It's becoming more and more sophisticated all the time," Mr. Morette says of the spills.

The team has several materials on hand in the truck to contain a spill. First, they may lay an absorbent "boom" around a sewer outfall to contain the chemical, which always floats on top of the water. Then, a "diaper" - an absorbent white pad that looks just like a diaper - can be laid on top of the water to soak up the chemical.

In other cases, an absorbent similar to peatmoss called Oclan-sorb, can be poured on top of the spill.

Sometimes, simple straw does the trick, said Mr. Morette.

Their truck is loaded with the absorbent boom and diapers, straw, the peat material, picks, axes, and several "common sense" utensils such as aluminum shovels to avoid causing dangerous sparks. There are also harnesses which can allow a 90-pound man to heave a 300-pound man out of a manhole in times of emergency.

The truck also carried a huge yellow "spills barrel." That barrel can be placed on top of a leaking barrel and flipped over to quickly lessen the effect a defective barrel can have on the environment.

Once, during a severe lightning storm, a transformer crashed to the ground spilling its dangerous toxic chemicals on Confederation Street in Glen Williams. The chemicals made their way into two ponds in the area. Using the boom and the diapers, the spills response team was able to clean up the mess before it caused too much damage.

On another occasion, weed spray escaped into Silver Creek near Park Avenue after a hose containing weed spray burst open on Hillside Drive. The team was able

to trace the leak to the sewer outfall on Silver Creek. They spent the next two days taking eight-hour shifts cleaning up the mess.

Early last summer a "pink substance" escaped from Smith and Stone on Glen Road. The spills team contained it while the company cleaned it up, said Mr. Smiley, a foreman with the team.

The biggest spill the team had to deal with occurred at Park Thermal Ltd. on Todd Road last March. A truck carrying naphtha petroleum split open spilling 5,000 gallons (22,500 litres) on to the surrounding area. Halton Region took control of that spill while the Halton Hills team provided the back-up.

While they are trained to handle leaks, both Halton Region and the Halton Hills team have their work inspected by the Ministry of Environment, said Mr. Smiley.

And the time of the spills, naturally, can never be convenient. If the call comes in from Halton Region late at night, it's out of bed and into the yellow truck.

"We're on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week," said Mr. Smiley.



These are the faces Halton Hills residents see around town as the emergency spills response team makes sure any chemical spills are cleaned up or contained until the larger unit from the Halton Region

arrives on the scene. In front are Ken Robinson, Dick Spear and Keith Smiley. Behind are Bob Fendley, Bob Clark and Don Swackhamer. (Herald photo)

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