

Background and Context

On 15 February 1996, the *Sea Empress*, a 147,000 tonne tanker bringing crude oil to Milford Haven in south-west Wales, ran aground and, over the following week, released 72,000 tonnes of crude oil and 480 tonnes of fuel oil into the sea. Despite a rapid and effective clean-up response at sea, oil came ashore along 200 km of coastline; much of it in a National Park, an area of international importance for its wildlife and natural beauty. A ban was imposed on commercial and recreational fishing in the region and there was concern that tourism, important to the local economy, would be badly affected by the heavily oiled beaches. Several thousand seabirds washed ashore, leading to a major cleaning and rehabilitation operation.

How the Topic was Handled

- The national response organisation, the Marine Pollution Control Unit of the Coastguard Agency, the district councils and Dyfed County Council had contingency plans which were put into action, including the National Contingency Plan.
- As the shoreline response to the incident was beyond the capability of a local authority (Tier 3 spill), a Joint Response Centre (JRC) was requested to be set up, which Central Government agreed to, and which resulted in the local authority having access to Central Government technical assistance and equipment. The at-sea operations were handled exclusively by Central Government.
- Dyfed County Council was responsible for the shoreline clean-up response and the Marine Pollution Control Unit of the Coastguard Agency was responsible for the at-sea response. A Marine Response Centre was set up at the Coastguard Office in Milford Haven, and the JRC was set up at the neighbouring offices of the Milford Haven Port Authority. The JRC followed the template identified in the local contingency plan and the National Contingency Plan, and involved various organisations with a remit to respond to such an incident e.g. Countryside Council for Wales, National Rivers Authority, Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority, District Councils.
- The JRC was responsible for the shoreline clean-up response to the oil spill. This involved the assessment of the impact of the spill on the affected coastline, and the planned response to it including the deployment of significant labour and equipment resources.
- The incident occurred on the evening of 15 February 1996, and both at-sea and shoreline recovery operations commenced the following morning. The majority of the spilled oil took some 7 weeks to recover, and as the response moved into its secondary planned phase, additional significant beach cleaning operations were set up which took a further 6 months to complete.
- The local authorities incurred expenditure in the order of £5 million in shoreline clean-up activities.
- The ship's insurers set up a local claims office immediately following the spill, and the International Tanker Owners Pollution Federation were represented at the Joint Response Centre to provide technical

assistance in the response activities. They also provided the local representation for the International Oil Pollution Compensation Fund, ensuring that all response activities carried out at the direction of the local authority were reasonable and technically sound to enable compensation to be subsequently received.

- Waste was a significant issue with 22,000 tonnes of liquid oily wastes, 7,800 tonnes of oiled sand and 4,500 tonnes of oiled beach materials requiring disposal. In addition there was also tens of thousands of tonnes of oiled beach material (ie. sand, pebbles, rocks, etc.) processed at 4 temporary on-site waste treatment operations set up and located around the coast that was subsequently returned to the beaches of origin after cleaning.
- A complete ban on fishing and shell fish harvesting was imposed in the area.
- Over 7,000 dead or oiled birds were collected from the shores, a fraction of the estimated total and far less than if the incident had happened several weeks later when the area would have been home to large colonies of breeding birds.

Lessons Identified

- There was no strategic waste management plan in place and waste storage and treatment areas for large volumes of oily waste had not been pre-identified.
- Regional / national waste strategies were not available for an emergency producing large quantities of waste that overwhelmed local infrastructure.
- Logistics of large scale oily waste handling had not been considered, resulting in bottlenecks.
- Conflict over final disposal – note much legislation change since 1996 - routes available then now closed.
- Clean up techniques were not considered in advance by the regulator.
- The regulator was not involved in decision making process.
- The end point for cleaning was not well defined, ie. when is a beach “clean”?
- Shoreline Clean-Up Assessment needed to be developed and better understood.
- Local contingency plan was followed, and worked well. However, because of the imminent reorganisation of local authorities in Wales, in April 1996, key players were unavailable to respond to the incident as planned for, and this resulted in difficulties in the early stages of the response. The Chair of the Joint Response Centre was taken up by the General Manager of the Milford Haven Port Authority, as no senior officer of the local authority was available to take on this key role. Also, there was a reorganisation of the Environmental Regulatory Service, with the disbanding of the National River Authorities and the District Council functions, and the formation of the Environment Agency in April 1996. This resulted in some operational difficulties in the shoreline response, as decisions made on the 'fate of oil' at local contingency level were

subsequently overturned by officers of the newly formed Environment Agency.

- The high level of deployment of local authority staff/workforce in the shoreline response had a significant effect on normal local authority activities.
- The close co-operation of the various partners in the Joint Response Centre resulted in a well co-ordinated response to the clean-up.
- Important that there is close collaboration between the at-sea activities and the on-shore response.
- Ensure that there is a good working relationship between the Joint (now termed Shoreline) Response Centre and the Insurers' representatives to avoid difficulties further down the line in attempting to recover expenditure incurred in response activities.
- Don't underestimate the administrative, clerical, procurement and financial assistance required in operating a Shoreline Response Centre. Vital that all decisions are fully documented, complete with the rationale behind such decisions.
- The pollution incident also became a widespread public health incident and was associated with higher anxiety and depression, worse mental health; and self reported headache, sore eyes and sore throat for those living in areas exposed to the oil.

Contacts for Further Information

Dyfed County Council

Additional Documents

- http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/picture_gallery/06/uk_the_sea_empress_disaster/html/1.stm [External website]
- <http://www.swan.ac.uk/empress/overview.htm> [External website]
- <http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/dot/seaemp/sempr1.htm> [External website]
- <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/shippingports/shipping/elc/theseaempressincidentssummary5010> [External website]
- [Acute Health Effects of the Sea Empress Oil Spill](#) [External website]
- [The Environmental Impacts of the Sea Empress Oil Spill – publication by the Sea Empress Environmental Evaluation Committee](#) [External website]
- [EROCIPS website](#) [External website]