

## **Oil Spill response in the United Kingdom.**

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The UK has a chequered career with respect to oil spills. Located at a junction of trade routes through North West Europe, the volume of shipping both visiting and passing our shores makes the waters some of the busiest in the world, added to this the weather around our shores can also present significant risks to shipping. It is hardly surprising then, that in spite of the arrangements made to minimise the risk of accidents and spills a number of major incidents have occurred. It is a fact that events cause events, and in the main legislation to respond to the cause and effects of accidents is reactive rather than proactive based on the lessons learned during an incident. With the rather sad fact that UK has had its fair share of problems, the ensuing arrangements to respond to incidents have evolved and provided us with a robust system of response management. The Torrey Canyon in 1967 was the initial event that showed the effects of a major oil spill of 119,000 tonnes of crude oil from a tanker grounded in the English Channel affecting both British and French coasts. The incident demonstrated two things, firstly the fact that we were poorly prepared for such an event with limited means to respond to the spill, and secondly that there was no simple means to compensate people that were affected. Research on response equipment and low toxicity dispersants was initiated, as was the discussions surrounding the CLC and Fund protocols. Time passed by with a number of incidents such as ESSO Bernicia, Eleni V, Christos Bitas, and Tarpenbek, all giving more experience to those in the industry and creating new problems and solutions.

But as always there are watershed events that shake the foundations, Exxon Valdez in 1989 shook the industry world-wide with legislation in both the oil and shipping industry creating new rules and setting new standards for all. Whilst not the biggest incident of all time it was probably the most influential in creating a new environment for oil and shipping operations with the requirement for double hulled tankers, prescribed response arrangements and the likelihood of massive financial impact in the event of a spill. At the same time worldwide shipping was in the grip of a series of major incidents, Kirke, Mega Borg, Haven, Katina P, Nagasaki spirit all occurred around this time. The response to the incidents was also causing some debate, at an international level the IMO set upon the development of the Oil Pollution (OPRC convention) to try and set standards for preparedness of signatory member states requiring them to have in place the six elements of preparedness.

- A National Plan
- A competent Authority
- A spill reporting system
- Access to response Resources
- A programme of training
- A programme of exercising the plan.

UK government signed and implemented the convention and introduced statutory instruments to ensure its obligation could be fulfilled. Around the same time (1992), the Braer incident occurred with the grounding of the tanker off the coast of Shetland with the loss of some 80,000 tonnes of Gulfaks crude. The very light oil dispersed naturally in the high seas although sedimentation of oil in the surf zone led to the formation of large quantities of tar balls which travelled sub sea to the fishing areas south of Shetland forcing their closure. The events surrounding the incident led to the publishing of Lord Donaldson's report 'Safer ships, Cleaner seas' and dealt with issues of ship quality, accident prevention arrangements and salvage intervention. The outcome was the introduction of a series of Emergency Towing Vessels stations around the coast at 'pinch points' to prevent groundings. This system, combined with the CAST agreement for towage, has proved very successful in preventing a number of potential incidents. In 1995 the Sea Empress grounding occurred with the loss of some 72,000

tonnes of Forties Crude. The vessel grounded on entry to the Port of Milford Haven losing some 2,000 tonnes of oil, during the subsequent prolonged salvage operation a further 70, 000 tones of oil was lost with damage to the environment being widespread and massive damage to the ship. The main issue during the event was the command and control during the salvage operations and the responsibility for decision making. Lord Donaldson was requested again to review the incident and prepare a report. The output was a report dealing with command and control during salvage incidents and the outcome was the introduction of the post of Secretary of States Representative, (SOSREP). The post was intended to give the holder the ability to make objective operational decisions on the course of action without political interference. The concept has proved extremely effective and had led to some effective operations by Government and salvage teams to minimise pollution during marine casualties, so much so that the Australian government has emulated the programme with the advent of the Marine Emergency Commander ( MERCOMM). Other events in later years have also taken their toll, the ERIKA and the Prestige, hull failures of smaller tankers carrying high viscosity oils that have emulsified caused massive damage to French and Spanish coastlines with huge clean up costs. The outcome from those incidents have led to huge ship building programmes to replace single hulled tonnage, comprehensive ship vetting, the implementation of the ISM code, STCW code, these initiatives have all played a part in reducing risks. But is the programme of improvements working? Certainly in terms of tanker accidents the number of serious incidents has declined markedly over the past few years. Other accidents are still occurring but they are focussed more on cargo ships and other vessels with Bunker spills being the prevalent problem. Weather related accidents are occurring, the extremes of weather being experienced around the world have led to a number of significant events and the pattern looks set for this to continue for the foreseeable future. Given this backdrop the presentation will show the response arrangements in the UK and talk about how spills can be responded to and the limitations of the techniques.