



THE RISK OF OIL SPILLS

The South Pacific Region comprises fourteen Pacific Island Countries (PICs) and seven Territories. With no oil and gas exploration and production in the area, very little crude oil passes through the South Pacific Region as a whole. There is regional shipment of refined products but less than 150,000 tonnes of persistent oil are received each year by all the Pacific Island countries together. Although the region is not free from navigational hazards, the low traffic density has resulted in just one major spill in the last thirty years. There have been a number of intermediate spills, chiefly around the coast of Australia, the largest importer of oil in the region and significant numbers of small spills mainly from fishing vessel casualties.

Groundings and collisions are the main causes of marine casualties in the region, with groundings accounting for some 65% of incidents. Overall the region can still be considered low risk in a global context. More locally, there are clusters of high risk potential from navigation hazards and shipping density in Fiji, French Polynesia and the Solomon Sea shores of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, with smaller clusters in Tonga, the Samoa's, Vanuatu, the corridor from Chuuk northward past Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands. The South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) reports the main oil spill risks to be found in Guam, Papeete and Madang and to lesser extents in Noumea (New Caledonia) and Suva, Vuda and Lautoka (Fiji).

Although risks from trade and passing traffic in the region are generally low, another source of spills is becoming increasingly important. Some three million gross tonnes of warships, sunk in the region during World War Two, are beginning to show signs of deterioration after 50 years of storms and corrosion in seawater. This led to the spill of nearly 100 tonnes of fuel oil from the USS MISSISSINEWA in 2001 and fears of potential further spills of aviation fuel, marine diesel and bunker oils from this and similar vessels. The USS MISSISSINEWA alone reportedly contains another 19,000 tonnes of fuel and amongst the list of sunken vessels compiled by SPREP to date are 50 oil tankers, 23 large aircraft carriers, 22 battle ships and 213 destroyers. Areas potentially affected by oil spills from large wrecks are the waters around Yap and Truk Lagoon (Federated States of Micronesia), parts of the Coral Sea and the Sound of Guadalcanal (Solomon Islands).

Natural resources are in short supply on the small islands characterising the region. Thus, an oil spill can have a disproportionately large impact on island communities. In addition to direct damage to coral reef and mangrove habitats underpinning vital fisheries and tourism industries, there are also implications arising from the clean-up and disposal of oil pollution waste. The protection of ground water supplies from oil contamination is of prime importance.

Major tanker spills of over 5,000 tonnes in the South Pacific Region since 1974

Vessel Name	Quantity spilled		Country	Year	Cause
	(tonnes)	(Type)			
IRENES CHALLENGE	34,000	CRUDE	US Midway Islands	1977	HULL FAILURE

THE STATE OF PREPAREDNESS

The Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) has played a key role in fostering the development of National Contingency Plans and improving preparedness in the region. In association with the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) and with funding from IMO, the SPC has been instrumental in the development of a model marine pollution Act for Pacific Island Countries. In 2001 a draft Marine Pollution Act was presented, with focus on prevention, containment and clean-up of oil spills. The model legislation for Pacific Island countries contains provisions for the establishment of a national pollution committee at government level and the appointment of an on-scene commander. The act also requires preparation of national and local oil spill contingency plans and advocates regional cooperation along the lines of OPRC 90. The model includes provisions for the establishment of a 'National Marine Pollution Fund' for the acquisition of clean-up materials and equipment. The Fund would be built up with marine pollution levies charged to ship owners and owners/operators of tank farms or oil storage depots.

In 1990, the Convention for the Protection of the Natural Resources and Environment of the South Pacific Region, and the Protocol Concerning Co-operation in Combating Pollution Emergencies entered into force. With the exception of Kiribati, Tonga and Vanuatu, all countries and dependent territories have ratified the Convention. However, only the Cook Islands, Tonga and Fiji have drafted or enacted the necessary legislation to enable the Protocol. The operational arm of the Protocol, the Pacific Islands Regional Marine Spill Contingency Plan (PACPLAN) was endorsed by all SPREP members in 2000 and has been activated once during a spill in Yap during 2001. National Contingency Plans have also been developed throughout the region with technical assistance by SPREP leaving only Tonga and Niue without such plans.

A network of spill response equipment stocks in the region is currently being developed with a review of regional needs scheduled for 2003 assisted by funding from the IMO and Canada. In addition, the oil industry in Australia has established the Australian Marine Oil Spill Centre (AMOSC) at Geelong, Victoria to act as a national Tier 2/3 stockpile of equipment.

Sixteen states and dependent territories have ratified the Civil Liability Convention 1992 and 12 have ratified the Fund Convention 1992. The US Oil Pollution Act 1990 (OPA 90) which includes spill response arrangements and compensation in US territorial waters, extends to its territories in the region. The OPRC Convention has been ratified by 10 states and dependent territories in the region.



STATUS OF CONTINGENCY PLANS, TIERED RESOURCES AND CONVENTIONS

	Competent National Authority	National Plan	Clean-up Resources		Subregional Agreement	MARPOL	OPRC '90	LLMC '76	CLC '69 CLC '92	FUND '92	Inter-vention '69/'73
			Tier 1	Tier 2							
Australia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	'92	'92	'73
Cook islands	Yes	Yes			Yes						
Fiji	Yes	Yes			Yes				'92	'92	'69
French territories	Yes	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	'92	'92	
Kiribati	Yes	Yes									
Marshall Is.	Yes	Yes			Yes		Yes	Yes	'92	'92	'73
Micronesia	Yes	Yes			Yes						
Nauru	Yes	Yes			Yes						
New Zealand	Yes	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	'92	'92	'69
Niue	Yes				Yes						
Palau	Yes	Yes			Yes						
Papua New Guinea	Yes	Yes			Yes				'92	'92	'69
Solomon Is.	Yes	Yes			Yes						
Tonga	Yes					Yes			'92	'92	'73
Tuvalu	Yes	Yes			Yes				'69		
UK dependencies	Yes	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			
US territories	Yes	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes				
Vanuatu	Yes	Yes				Yes	Yes	Yes	'92	'92	'73
Western Samoa	Yes	Yes			Yes				'92	'92	

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