



## Oil Spills from Outer Continental Shelf Operations

The Department of the Interior often boasts of the safety record of Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) oil and gas operations. The OCS spill record, however, is not as clean as DOI would have it appear. In fact, many of DOI's comments on the spill record of OCS operations are misleading.

A DOI Press Release from July 2005 stated the following:

*“Offshore energy development has a phenomenal safety record. Since 1975, the offshore industry has a safety record of 99.999 percent meaning that only .0001 percent of the oil produced has been spilled. In the past 35 years, there has not been a significant oil spill from a platform in federal waters. In fact, natural cracks in the seabed release more than 150 times the amount of oil into the Gulf than is spilled from offshore platforms.”*

These statements are misleading to the public for a number of reasons. An unsuspecting person reading this statement would be led to believe that only trivial quantities of oil is spilled from OCS operations. This, however, is not the case.

First, **it is untrue that there have not been any “significant” spills from OCS platforms in the past 35 years.** MMS defines a “significant” spill as one that is greater than 1,000 bbl (42,000 gallons). The MMS spill database clearly shows 6 “significant” spills from OCS platforms in the past 35 years. The largest during this time period, the South Timbalier spill in 1970, involved a spill of more than 2.2 million gallons (53,000 bbl). Perhaps DOI misspoke in the press release and intended to say that there have been no “significant” spills in the past 20 years, as this is a true statement, given the definition of “significant” used by MMS. The last “significant” spill from an OCS platform was in 1980; the High Island spill of nearly 1,500 bbl after Hurricane Jeanne (Anderson and Labelle, 2000).

Secondly, there is a **serious problem associated with small, chronic spillage from OCS platforms and pipelines.** Between 1985 and 1999, there were **19,506 spills between 0 and 42 gallons (1 bbl) from OCS platforms and pipelines** (*ibid.*). Chronic oil pollution is a serious threat to many aquatic life forms. Oil can be toxic to fish, crabs, shellfish, and other invertebrates at very small quantities and chronic exposure can cause a range of lethal and sublethal effects on these organisms such as mutations and reduced reproductive capacity.

Furthermore, from 1985 to 1999, there were **66 spills between 1.1 and 9.9 bbl and 28 spills between 50 and 499.9 bbl of oil from OCS platforms.** Many oil spill experts would agree that it is not necessarily the size of the spill that determines the impact on the ecological resources of the area. Often times, it is the type of fuel spilled, the time of year, the location, and local weather conditions that determine the type of effects the spill will have once oil is released into the environment. A scientist at the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation recently commented that some of the worst spills that he has witnessed were small spills in biologically sensitive areas, such as those used as nursery grounds for fish and crabs.

A poignant example of the fact that it is not just size that matters when it comes to oil spills occurred just this summer. In June of 2005 in the Gulf of Mexico, an oil spill of just 560 gallons

Cont. on back

(approximately 15 barrels) from the Amerada Hess platform which was triggered by Tropical Storm Arlene led to the oiling of over 800 seabirds, of which at least 463 died (FWS, 2005). The oil spread to a bird rookery on the island in the Breton National Wildlife Refuge, and the area affected was designated as a national wilderness area.

In addition, the statements made in the press release mentioned above make no reference to spills from pipelines associated with OCS production. Indeed, Anderson and LaBelle (2000) showed that **OCS pipeline spill occurrence rates for spills greater than or equal to 1,000 bbl remained essentially unchanged since 1980**. Their report showed that there have been **8 large spills from OCS pipelines between 1985 and 1999, with an average spill size of 6,700 bbl** (281,400 gallons).

This average spill amount comes close to the 320,000 gallons spilled off Unalaska Island last December from the *Selendang Ayu* spill. This spill caused the closure of fisheries, washed oil on beaches, and smothered and killed birds and sea otters in Skan and Makushin Bay. The clean up response, which has been incredibly expensive, has also been insufficient for a number of reasons, and was cut short in its' first round due to the rough weather associated with winter approaching in the Aleutians. Oil remains on the beaches in the area and much will stay there, because even if clean up resumes next year, it will not do so to the extent that was seen this past spring and summer. This unfortunate example is a warning sign to us of the danger of an oil spill in this region and the inability to clean up spills in such a harsh environment.

**Studies by MMS have shown that a spill in the NAB planning area could push oil up along the Alaska Peninsula at all times of the year** (MMS, 1984). Furthermore, recent public meetings in Anchorage and the Bristol Bay region held by the Shell Corporation have shown industry interest moving closer to the sensitive coastline of the Alaska Peninsula. This is of great concern, as this would increase the likelihood of an oil spill reaching the coastal bays, lagoons, and sea grass beds used as nursery grounds for fish and crabs, and as habitat for seabirds and waterfowl. Oil spill trajectories in the NAB planning area indicate that discharges of this dangerous, toxic substance could contaminate the mouths of rivers and tributaries where salmon spawn and where commercial and subsistence fisheries for these fish occur.

As mentioned above, **the spill record for OCS pipelines is significant and is not improving**. This raises serious concerns about Bristol Bay OCS development scenarios that would place a pipeline across the Alaska Peninsula Wildlife Refuge. Severe weather coupled with high volcanic and seismic activity in the region would only increase the chance of a pipeline rupturing and spilling oil into this area critical for juvenile and larval forms of salmon- which occur in high concentrations in the waters of the refuge and are sensitive to even small quantities of oil.

*For more information contact Kelly Harrell at: P.O. Box 101145 Anchorage, AK 99510, (907) 277-5357, E-mail: [Kelly@akmarine.org](mailto:Kelly@akmarine.org)*

Sources:

Anderson, C.M. and Labelle, R.P. (2000) Update of Comparative Occurrence rates for Offshore Oil Spills. *Spill Science & Technology Bulletin* Vol. 6 No. 5/6, pp. 303-321.

U.S. Department of the Interior, Minerals Management Service (1984). *Proceedings of a Synthesis Meeting: The North Aleutian Shelf Environment and Possible Consequences of Offshore Oil and Gas Development*. Outer Continental Shelf Environmental Assessment Program SR-003.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (June 17, 2005) Press Release: Update Bird Recovery Number for Breton Sound Oil Spill. Accessed September 30, 2005 at: <http://www.fws.gov/southeast/news/2005/r05-052.html>.