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Sweep and Suck the Oil from the Surface of the Sea

Dutch Response Team Presents Solution for US Oil Disaster

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In-depth Report: THE BP OIL SLICK

Two Dutch companies are on stand-by to help the Americans tackle an oil slick in the Gulf of Mexico. The two companies use huge booms to sweep and suck the oil from the surface of the sea. The US authorities, however, have difficulties with the method they use.

What do the Dutch have that the Americans don't when it comes to tackling oil spills at sea? "Skimmers," answers Wierd Koops, chairman of the Dutch organisation for combating oil spills, Spill Response Group Holland.

The Americans don't have spill response vessels with skimmers because their environment regulations do not allow it. With the Dutch method seawater is sucked up with the oil by the skimmer. The oil is stored in the tanker and the superfluous water is pumped overboard. But the water does contain some oil residue, and that is too much according to US environment regulations.[media:factfile1]

US regulations contradictory

Wierd Koops thinks the US approach is nonsense, because otherwise you would have to store the surplus seawater in the tanks as well.

> "We say no, you have to get as much oil as possible into the storage tanks and as little water as possible. So we pump the water, which contains drops of oil, back overboard."

US regulations are contradictory, Mr Knoops stresses. Pumping water back into the sea with oil residue is not allowed. But you are allowed to combat the spill with chemicals so that the oil dissolves in the seawater. In both cases, the dissolved oil is naturally broken down quite quickly.

It is possible the Americans will opt for the Dutch method as the damage the oil spill could cause to the mud flats and salt marshes along the coast is much worse, warns Wetland expert Hans Revier.

> "You have to make sure you clear up the oil at sea. As soon as the oil reaches the mud flats and salt marshes, it is too late. The only thing you can do then is dig it up. But then the solution is worse than the problem."

Wadden Sea experiments

Hans Revier, lector in Marine Wetland Studies at the Stenden College in Leeuwarden, recollects experiments in the Dutch Wadden Sea wetlands. When combined oil and gas pipelines were to be laid in the area, experiments to combat potential oil spills were held.

> "It turned out that dissolving the oil with chemicals caused more damage than the oil itself. And burning the oil didn't help either. That leaves just one solution: to allow nature to take its course. It took almost ten years for the oil to break down naturally from the tanker Amoco Cadiz which stranded off the French coast in 1978 and for the environment to recover."

That leaves the Americans no alternative. If they want to save the mud flats and salt marshes along the coast they will have to adopt the Dutch method. It can be done very quickly, because only the oil skimmers need to be flown across the Atlantic and placed on local tankers, explains Mr Koops.

Senator convinced

A team of around eight men are on stand-by and four skimmers and extra material are ready to be loaded. The local senator is already convinced and is trying to talk the admiral who is coordinating the operation into accepting help from the Netherlands. The answer may be given today.

But nothing is certain. In 1989, a Dutch team and equipment had already been flown in to tackle the Exxon Valdez oil tanker disaster off the coast of Alaska. But in the end the US authorities sent them home.

Few disasters caused by oil platforms

The leak in the Deepwater Horizon oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico could cause the worst ever oil pollution in the history of the United States. Until now oil platforms have seldom caused major environmental disasters. The biggest environmental disaster caused by an oil platform before now was in March 2001 when the P-36 belonging to Brazil's oil company Petrobras leaked. The oil slick measured 400 square kilometres. By comparison: the Deepwater Horizon spill already covers an area of almost 10,000 square kilometres.

Worst oil disaster until now in US

The US tanker Exxon Valdez in 1989, which ran aground in William Sound off Alaska.

In 1978, 360 kilometres of the coast of Brittany was polluted with oil from the Liberian tanker Amoco Cadiz, which broke in two.

In 1999, Erika, a tanker registered in Malta, ran into rocks off Brittany and polluted 200 kilometres of the French coastline.

In 1992, the Spanish Galician coast was polluted after the Greek tanker Aegean Sea broke in two and exploded.

Piper Alpha: The worst ever oil platform disaster was the explosion on the North sea platform Piper Alpha in July 1988, almost 200 kilometres north of Aberdeen in Scotland. 167 people were killed and the damage amounted to almost a billion euros. 62 workers survived, many of them by diving into the sea.

In the 1980s in particular, many oil platforms capsized across the world as the result of hurricanes, with hundreds of people losing their lives.

Listen to the Newsline interviews with Wierd Knoops and Hans Revier

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