

Norway Oil Spill Clean-up Problems

February 17, 2011 Norway Oil Spill

The *Godafoss*, an Icelandic container ship, ran aground off Norway's southern coast on February 17, 2011 and began leaking oil. The ship was carrying about 200,000 gallons of heavy fuel oil, and it is still not known how much of that oil spilled into Norway's Arctic waters. This spill demonstrated the particular difficulties experienced when cleaning up an oil spill in icy conditions, and pulls back the curtain on Shell's claims that it has "studied and perfected techniques for recovering oil in Arctic conditions."



The ship ran aground in the Hvaler archipelago near the Ytre Hvaler National Park, Norway's only marine preservation area. The park is home to an abundance of marine mammals, sea birds, and cold-water coral reefs. Many species in the area are listed as endangered or threatened.

The Norwegian and Swedish coast guards led the clean up and containment efforts, using oil-spill response vessels, tugboats, surveillance planes, and helicopters. Less than a week after the spill, more than 26,000 gallons of oil had been cleaned from the waters around the *Godafoss*. Meanwhile, oil had come ashore at Aker Island, a seabird reserve. A spokesperson for the Norwegian Coastal Administration (NCA, or Kystverket in Norwegian) stated that hundreds of birds had been oiled by the spill. Oiled birds were being shot on sight to put them out of their suffering.

According to on-the-ground reports, much of the oil has seeped into thin layers in the ice, making it impossible to get it out. Ice also drifted into the containment booms, filling them up. In the days after the spill, falling snow made it impossible to find the oil. Arctic weather conditions have complicated clean-up efforts to such a degree that complete containment has taken months.

The NCA said that ice, fog and sub-zero temperatures were complicating the oil cleanup despite calm seas. According to the Ytre Hvaler National Park senior supervisor, Bernt Erik Larsen, oil under the ice and spotted in cracks "cannot be cleaned until the ice has melted... and the long-term effects cannot be estimated until after the cleaning is completed." An NCA representative added that "Very much of the oil we now see is thin, thin layer that settles in the ice edge. It is oil that is not possible to take action" and "[t]he ice makes it difficult to use the equipment we have."

Coast guard captain Pal Bustgaard said that "this is an oil catastrophe. The oil slick continues to widen out. And it is frightening that this happens in the middle of a national park." The Norwegian Coast Guard also states that "[t]here is relatively little experience in oil spill response operations in ice in Norwegian waters."

Shell's Bad Record in Norway

Norway's Petroleum Safety Authority (PSA) had recently cited Shell for inadequacies in multiple areas of its offshore operations in Norwegian waters. According to Ole-Johan Faret, a PSA spokesman, Shell was under investigation following an oil well maintenance error in December 2010 at the Draugen field, about 60 miles offshore and 100 miles northwest of Trondheim, the country's third largest city. Faret said that the incident had "major accident potential," which occurred because a Shell error during maintenance caused a rig to have only one barrier against an oil spill from the well. Shell's failures included "management, risk assessment, well barriers, well barrier sketches, well control, and daily reporting of drilling and well activities." Faret noted, "The barrier situation was not taken seriously. This is not an acceptable approach." Faret further added that Shell seemed to be following a "quick-fix philosophy." The fact is that Shell simply is not ready for exploration activities in the Arctic Ocean.

The Bottom Line

The Norway spill has shown what it really looks like when you mix oil and ice – a significant oil spill in Arctic waters could have crippling effects on the ecosystem, wildlife, and people in the Arctic. America's Arctic Ocean is home to many of our nation's most beloved wildlife species – polar bears, walrus, ice seals, bowhead whales, beluga whales and more. These Arctic waters are the "garden" for the Inupiat people of Alaska's Arctic coast. With so much at stake, and so little that can be done once an accident occurs, the federal government must not allow a headlong rush into risky drilling in America's Arctic Ocean.