New Reports Find Major Flaws in Oil Spill Response in the Arctic

Oils spills are never good. But spills in already vulnerable and remote areas can have dire consequences on the environment in those areas.

WWF-Canada recently released reports that identify major weaknesses in response preparedness in the event of an oil spill in Arctic shipping lanes. Heavy fuel oil is the standard marine fuel for cargo ships, tankers and large cruise ships. It's also one of the world's dirtiest, most polluting ship fuels'and the most difficult to clean up.

The research uncovered major issues with the state and availability of oil spill response equipment, limited training resources and unreliable communications infrastructure, which, combined with a rise in shipping in the Arctic and extreme weather events, leaves Arctic communities increasingly vulnerable.

The consequences of an oil spill in remote communities include:

- Contamination of important habitat for wildlife such as polar bears, walrus, seabirds and seals, as well as narwhals, belugas and bowhead whales
- Long-term destruction of fish habitat, a staple of the Arctic diet

- Wide-reaching contamination if oil gets trapped under sea ice and travels to communities hundreds of kilometres away.

Although the chances of a large-scale oil spill in the Arctic are currently small, the consequences would be significant. As sea ice melts and ship traffic increases, there's an opportunity now'while traffic is still relatively low'to put measures in place to respond to spills or prevent them from happening in the first place.

Gaps in oil spill response capacity are outlined in two parallel assessments for the **Beaufort region in the western Arctic** and **Nunavut in the east**. The reports found that:

- Coastal community members are often the first responders to any spill, and need access to effective and reliable equipment to contain and clean up oil. But only a small number of such communities have access to the most basic oil spill response equipment from the Canadian Coast Guard.
- The communities that *do* have equipment say it's irregularly maintained, too few community members are trained to use it, and that some communities don't have a key to access the storage containers.
- Harsh weather conditions, periods of prolonged darkness and the presence of sea ice make most standard oil spill response equipment ineffective.
- Remote locations mean response times for large-scale cleanup and storage equipment can be more than 10 times longer than in waters south of 60ø latitude.
- Lack of reliable communications infrastructure makes it difficult for communities to call for assistance, and for responders to communicate with those on land during an oil spill response.

But a third report outlines a framework for creating oil spill response plans in Nunavut's remote communities and includes

recommendations such as:

- Phase out the use by ships of heavy fuel oil
- Align response time standards in the North with those south of 60ø latitude
- Develop community-based, Arctic-specific response plans
- Consult with Inuit organizations on decisions that affect Arctic communities, and use both scientific and traditional knowledge to identify preferred shipping routes and areas to be avoided.

For more on spill prevention and response in general, see these OHS Insider resources:

- Spills: Take 6 Steps to Create a Spill Prevention Plan
- Spill Response: Answers to 11 Frequently Asked Questions
- Spill Prevention Checklist
- Model Spill Response and Reporting Policy.