

New Study Claims AER Isn't Accurately Reporting Spills or Their Impacts



The Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) is an agency that's supposed to ensure the safe, efficient, orderly and environmentally responsible development of hydrocarbon resources over their entire life cycle. But a new study commissioned by a First Nation says the AER hasn't reported accurately on the scale or impact of daily crude oil and salt water spills.

Dene Tha First Nation requested the spill study, which the Keepers of the Water helped to fund. Kevin Timoney, an independent ecologist based in Alberta, conducted the study.

The study, which hasn't been made publicly available yet, concluded that the AER hasn't provided 'the public with accurate, credible, complete, unbiased and timely information and fails in its responsibility to protect the environment.' As a result, Timoney called for the province's auditor general to audit 'the failure of the regulator.'

Timoney examined Alberta's spill database over a 38-year period between 1975-2013. In that time period, industry spilled at least 1.6 million barrels of crude oil and more than five million barrels of salt water onto the land and waterways, according to his analysis. (Saline spills can be more damaging to plants and vegetation because salts don't degrade over time.)

But Timoney found that the AER's spillage statistics didn't reflect the real scale of the problem because of missing data and other issues. For example, there are a lot of spills unaccounted for with no volume specified and many documented spills that appeared in newspapers but aren't in the database.

The AER database also doesn't include:

- Thousands of spills prior to 1975
- Spills from federally regulated pipelines
- Spills reported to Alberta's environment ministry
- Spills that classify oil or salt water as the second or third contaminant.

Timoney also visited 14 former oil spill sites to measure the impact over time. At one site in northwestern Alberta where oil was released in 1998, the

ecologist found the soil contaminated with 21.7% crude oil. Timoney adds that wherever he looked at spill sites, he found 'detectable soil, water and vegetation impacts.'

However, the AER routinely reported that 100% of the spilled contaminants had been recovered after spills, although scientific studies have found clean-up rates for spills on land typically recover less than half the oil.

Lastly, Timoney claims that AER spill reporting lacked scientific credibility because it suggested there had been almost no damage to wildlife and animals in Alberta.

The OHS Insider has articles, tools and other resources to help you prevent spills, such as by properly storing hazardous substances and creating a spill prevention plan, and properly respond if a spill does occur, including:

- How to comply with spill reporting requirements
- Model Spill Response Plan
- Answers to 11 FAQs about spill response
- Model Spill Response and Reporting Policy.

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