

Scottish Environment LINK

Media Release

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The Braer – 12 Years and Still Waiting for Better Protection Measures from Shipping Accidents



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Almost 12 years ago to the day the Braer (1) tanker carrying 85,000 tonnes of crude oil ran aground in hurricane force winds off the Shetland Islands. In the wake of the Braer oil spill, the Donaldson Inquiry (2) recommended that the most sensitive and environmentally valuable parts of our coastal seas should be identified as Marine Environment High Risk Areas (MEHRAs) in order to protect them from such disasters.

It now appears that the publication of the long over due report from the Department for Transport (DfT) containing its choices of Marine Environmental High Risk Areas is finally about to happen. Scottish Environment Groups hope that the report will identify sites in UK waters and will put forward management measures that will at last give much needed protection from the threat of shipping accidents.

"In 1993, the Shetland Islands got off lightly from the Braer spill, as most of the oil was swept out to sea - but we can't rely on fate alone to get us off the hook next time." said Helen McLachlan, Convener of the Scottish Environment LINK Marine Task Force (3).

Although less than one per cent of the Braer's load was washed ashore, the concentration in the sea was much higher. Inshore fisheries and salmon farms were badly affected, with oil concentrations up to 20,000 times higher than normal, and the harvests were lost. Fishing in the area was suspended for several weeks.

Fish, shellfish, marine mammals and various bird species were all affected by the spill. The Shetlands are known for their large colonies of birds, and many rare species stop there during migration. It is estimated that up to 32,000 birds could have perished because of the Braer oil spill.

NGOs including the Marine Conservation Society, WWF, Scottish Wildlife Trust, The National Trust for Scotland and RSPB Scotland have since campaigned for the introduction of Marine Environmental High Risk Areas to protect fragile marine areas. In the meantime, pollution incidents at sea have continued to occur such as the Sea Empress in 1996 and Jumbo in 2003.

It is anticipated that approximately 10% of the UK coastline will be selected as Marine Environment High Risk Areas⁴. However, NGOs are

concerned that some of the UK's most sensitive coastal waters will be overlooked as the methodology developed for identifying MEHRAs in 1999 was flawed. Furthermore, the identification of the sites alone will be of little use unless effective measures are introduced to tackle the threats from marine accidents.

After a ten year wait for the selection of MEHRAs, they must:

1. include sites which give adequate cover to the UK's most precious and sensitive marine sites e.g the Scilly Isles, St Kilda and the Minch;
2. include comprehensive management measures e.g. areas to be avoided and vessel traffic separation schemes. Without effective management measures the MEHRAs will be pointless;
3. include a tight action plan for implementation - we must not wait another year. *"We will be looking very carefully at the forthcoming announcement and report on MEHRAs and fully participating in the consultation regarding the types of mitigation and management measures that could be introduced at individual site."* said Calum Duncan, Scottish Officer for the Marine Conservation Society.

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[1] The MV Braer ran aground off the coast of Shetland on the 5 January 1993, spilling 85,000 tonnes of oil and killing some 5,000 seabirds. The Braer grounding could have been a much greater disaster. Breeding birds were away from Shetland, and the stormy weather dispersed the oil. However, oil has settled into the sediment in the Fair Isle Channel which means that the langoustine fishery has still not been re-opened. Much of the light crude oil the Braer was carrying dispersed quickly, but it is more toxic than the heavier crude oils which were carried by the Prestige and the Erika.

[2] The Donaldson Inquiry (May 1994) into the Braer spill made over 100 recommendations on improving shipping safety in the UK. However, since these recommendations were made there have been other disasters such as the MV Sea Empress which ran aground off Milford Haven 15 February 1996, not to mention those in European waters. In the meantime, although the majority of Lord Donaldson's proposals have been implemented, the introduction of MEHRAs remains an outstanding issue.

[3] Scottish Environment LINK (LINK) is an umbrella body for Scotland's voluntary environmental organisations representing approximately half a million members throughout Scotland. The LINK 'Marine Task Force' consists of the following environmental NGOs working on marine issues in Scotland:

- Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust

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- Marine Conservation Society
- National Trust for Scotland
- RSPB Scotland Scottish Wildlife Trust
- WWF Scotland
- Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society

[4] How are MEHRAs identified? the identification of MEHRAs is developed on a risk assessment basis, which couples the sensitivity of the environment, natural resources such as fisheries and wildlife with the vulnerability (such as the level of tanker activity, navigational difficulties, type of cargo - oil or hazardous chemicals) of the areas to shipping activities. The UK has also taken into account economic and social sensitivity.

[5] What management measures can MEHRAs have?

Shipping and navigation mitigation measures include:

- traffic separation schemes;
- set shipping routes;
- deep water routes;
- areas to be avoided;
- compulsory pilotage;
- greater use of tugs and salvage tugs located at key coast points
- more oil pollution response equipment available;
- marking MEHRAs on navigational charts; and
- educating mariners about the marine environment.

