Contingency Planning in the European Union: The Importance of Cooperation between States

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INTRODUCTION

In the past there has been considerable pressure to review and change the marine pollution prevention and response emergency system in the wake of large-scale oil spills. This has been the case in response to recent marine pollution incidents in European waters such as the Erika in 1999 and the Prestige in 2001. The development of pollution response frameworks at the national, regional, European and international levels has provided the context within which European Union (EU) Member States’ policies and activities have evolved.

The purpose of this article is to provide a brief outline of the existing regimes pertaining to preparedness and response to major marine pollution incidents within European waters and to present the findings of the workshop on “Contingency Planning in the European Union,” implemented by the Hellenic Marine Environment Protection Association (HELMEPA) 1–3 June, 2005 in Petalidi, southern Peloponnese, Greece.

HELMEPA is a voluntary non-governmental and non-profit organization founded jointly by Greek seafarers and shipowners in Piraeus in 1982. HELMEPA’s mission is to motivate the human element in shipping “from shipowner to seafarer” through proper information and education so that a spirit of pollution prevention and maritime safety prevails throughout the industry. Refresher training programs for seafarers conducted at sea and ashore, as well as printed and electronic aids and publications produced by the Association in both Greek and English are offered to its members. The respect the Association enjoys within the international maritime community allows it to provide its membership with concise and timely information.
The workshop was organized within the framework of the European Commission’s Directorate General for the Environment (DG ENV) “Call for Proposals 2004 in the field of Community cooperation against accidental or deliberate marine pollution” and was co-funded by the Commission. Contingency planning experts from fourteen EU Member States, Norway, Iceland, five non-Member States and nine international organizations and a representative of the Directorate General for the Environment of the European Commission participated in the workshop.

MARINE POLLUTION RISK IN EUROPEAN WATERS

To evaluate the nature and scale of the risk posed by spill incidents in European waters and oil spills in particular, it is necessary to review present oil trade patterns and associated tanker routes, as well as the socio-economic and environmental impact of large-scale incidents.

A diagram of traditional tanker routes in European waters is presented in Figure 1, which shows tanker traffic and volume of oil transported during 2001. Europe is a major importer of oil and associated products, 90 percent of which arrives by sea. Large quantities of oil are transported through the Mediterranean Sea, arriving mainly from the Middle East, either through the Suez Canal or the SuMed pipeline. Similarly, heavy tanker traffic is concentrated around the Atlantic coastline and in the English Channel towards northern Europe. This is not exclusively one-way traffic, with some exports such as from Russia moving westwards and southwards. By far the majority of oil transported is crude oil.

The history of past spills in European waters shows that the quantity of oil transported within a certain area is not in itself an indication of spill risk, but when combined with factors such as high vessel traffic, bad weather conditions and/or narrow congested straits, there is a strong correlation with previous major spill incidents.

Figure 2 shows the location of large tanker oil spills (> 700 tonnes) since 1984. It is worth noting that despite the large volumes of oil being transported both in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic and the fact that both sea areas suffer from heavy vessel traffic, the larger oil spills (> 10,000 tonnes) have occurred in the Atlantic with its harsher weather conditions.

One element that does not become apparent from Figure 1 is the increasing flow of oil and tanker traffic from the Russian ports of: