

Australian government downplays huge oil slick

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A major oil and gas rupture from the West Atlas mobile offshore drilling rig on August 21 off the northwestern coast of Australia is threatening to become a major environmental disaster. The slick now reportedly extends 180 kilometres from east to west and is 20 kilometres from the coast. The leakage is unlikely to be plugged for weeks.

The failure of the rig's owners and the federal Labor government to take action to stop the flow highlights the lack of personnel and infrastructure in remote areas to deal with such disasters. Australian ministers have deliberately downplayed the implications of the rupture so as not to endanger what is a major export earner.

Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) spokeswoman, Tracey Jiggins told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC): "It's certainly a big spill ... It is a major operation, so I'd certainly say it is one of the most serious spills that we've had in recent years." It is estimated that oil is pouring out at the rate of 470,000 litres a day.

After flying over the slick, Greens Senator Rachel Siewert said that the spill was "far worse than the community has been led to believe" and much closer to the coast. However, Minister for Resources and Energy Martin Ferguson insisted that the slick was still well off the coast. "Contrary to what the Greens are suggesting, the closest it is to the Australian coastline is in excess of 80 miles [148 km]," he said.

The 69-man crew from the rig was evacuated to nearby Truscott airbase in the Far North Kimberley Region. The discharge is made up of potentially explosive gas and highly volatile distillates. The only

action taken to date has been by the AMSA, which has sprayed an estimated 16,000 litres of chemical dispersant on the slick.

Vital safety equipment and chemicals were not readily available. A high-capacity pump and deluge spray equipment had to be flown to Darwin then transported to the area. A specialist plane from Singapore transported the dispersant. Mining analyst Peter Strachan told the ABC: "It could have been very much worse ... If that gas which was coming out had ignited, the whole thing would be burning." Inspectors have been unable to visit the rig due to the hazardous conditions.

An unnamed rig worker told the ABC that the crew had detected a gas leak of noxious hydrogen sulphide fumes from a drill hole 1,200 metres deep. The plug blocking the hole ruptured soon after and the leak was 8 kilometres long by the time the workers were evacuated 2 hours later.

The cause of the spill remains unknown. The rig's owners, Thai firm PTT Exploration and Production (PTTEP), have sent for a portable rig from Singapore to drill a relief well and to plug the existing hole with mud and cement. The new rig is not due to arrive until tomorrow and the Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association predict it would take about 50 days to end the seepage.

The Australian government has been in damage control mode from the outset. On August 23, Energy Minister Ferguson stated: "There is no threat to the Australian coast and, perhaps more importantly, it is evaporating naturally and the work of the Australian

Maritime Safety Authority will merely assist in that evaporation.”

As public criticism mounted, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd last week described the spill as “an appalling incident” and declared: “We’ve got to get to the absolute bottom of how it happened but the immediate challenge is to deal with the practical consequences.” However, he proposed no further action to deal with the present disaster.

While it appears that the leakage from the rig is mainly highly volatile fractions that may evaporate, concerns have been raised about the impact of the oil and the chemical dispersants on sea life. The isolated area is known for the richness of its animal life, including sea mammals and turtles.

World Wildlife Fund Dr Gilly Llewellyn told the media: “The oil and gas spill is still not under control and is expected to continue leaking for two months. Depending on winds, the slick could be pushed to atolls like Scott and Ashmore Reef—areas that are globally significant for their unique wildlife.”

The area around the Atlas rig is rich in oil and gas. A major concern of the West Australian and federal governments main concern has been to ensure that the \$50 billion Gorgon field off Barrow Island near the Pilbara coast goes ahead on schedule.

Federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett immediately declared that the spill had no relevance to his decision to approve the Gorgon project. “That is a proposal (Gorgon) that has been very carefully and closely assessed over a period of time by both the West Australian and the Commonwealth Governments,” he told the ABC.

Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association chief executive Belinda Robinson also dismissed any similarity between West Atlas and Gorgon. “The incident that occurred at West Atlas is a very, very rare incident,” she claimed.

Gorgon, a joint venture involving Shell, Exxon-Mobil and ChevronTexaco, will be Australia’s biggest

petrochemical project. On August 18, just prior to the West Atlas spill, Ferguson signed a contract with PetroChina for the sale of \$50 billion worth of *Liquefied natural gas* (LNG) from Gorgon.

The Gorgon gas will be processed into LNG on Barrow Island, a nature reserve just 56 kilometres off the North West coast. Environmental groups have raised concerns that the substantial industrial facility will cause considerable damage to the island and impact on wildlife in the area. Yet, on 27 August, Garrett dismissed environmental concerns and gave final approval.

The close proximity of West Atlas and Gorgon is one obvious reason why the Garrett, Ferguson and the Labor government have been playing down the impact of the continuing oil leak.



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