

Grounded ship threatens to break-up off New Zealand coast

John Braddock
26 October 2011

The economic and environmental impact from the grounding of the cargo ship *Rena* off the east coast of New Zealand is worsening, despite the efforts of international salvage experts to stabilise the stricken vessel.

The *Rena* ran aground on the Astrolabe Reef, 20 kilometres off the port of Tauranga, on October 5. Hundreds of tonnes of oil and the contents from spilled containers have washed up on nearby beaches. The ship remains wedged on the reef, and a deep split in its hull threatens to break it in two if heavy weather strikes. While no major spillages have occurred over the past week, congealed oil and other debris have washed up on the coastline around the East Cape, over 150 kilometres away.

Salvors working virtually around the clock have so far only managed to pump about 260 tonnes of fuel oil from the ship, leaving more than 1,000 tonnes on board. Oil is being removed from the *Rena*'s port fuel tank, with the next priority to access and clear fuel in the submerged starboard tank. The *Rena* was operating on the cheapest and crudest form of oil, which is particularly viscous and needs heating before it can be used. It has been enormously difficult to pump from the ship.

Eighty-eight containers have been lost overboard, with 29 unaccounted for. Sonar equipment is being used to find them. The remainder continue to list dangerously above the wreck. A ship-borne crane will be needed to remove them in what will be another difficult and hazardous operation. Experts have forecast that the salvage could take months to complete and is dependent on the vagaries of the weather. Tugs are on standby in case the ship breaks up, in which case an attempt will be made to tow the stern section into shallower water before it sinks.

The potential economic toll on the local community is acute. The seaside suburbs of Mount Maunganui and Papamoa, with stretches of white sandy beaches and blue water surf, are favourite holiday destinations for thousands of New Zealanders. Labour Weekend, just completed, usually heralds the beginning of the summer season but this year was marked with closed beaches. National on-scene commander Ian Niblock said some oil about 20 centimetres below the sand was causing problems. About 6,000 volunteers have registered to help with clean-up efforts.

Many local small businesses, including motel owners, fishing charters and eco-tourism operators, fear the worst. Transport Minister Steven Joyce in the National Party-led government described the situation as a “real waiting game”, and revealed nothing about compensation for affected businesses—or whether the *Rena*'s owner, Costamare Shipping, would foot the entire bill.

Costamare has refused to clarify whether its insurance cover would meet the costs of the incident. Talks between the government, lessee Mediterranean Shipping Company, and Costamare were legally privileged, Joyce said. “We will be fully resolving those matters as to who is liable for what,” he declared, but would not say what the final cost of the disaster was likely to be.

The long-term ecological effects will be profound. Scientists interviewed by the *Dominion Post* predicted that the toll on wildlife will last “for years”. The official death toll involving bird life this week approached 1,300 from among 23 species. Forest & Bird conservation spokesperson said this was just “the tip of the iceberg”. The disaster had come at the start of the breeding season, meaning that for many species this year's breeding season, and possibly next year's as

well, will simply be lost. The situation for some already endangered species, such as the New Zealand dotterell, of which only 1,500 birds are known to exist, is “grave” according to wildlife experts.

The Rena’s master and navigation officer are being set up as scapegoats for the devastating situation. Both have twice appeared in court to face a growing list of charges. They have been granted name suppression over fears for their personal safety. Hone Harawira, a member of parliament and leader of the recently formed Maori nationalist grouping, the Mana Party, publicly vilified the ship’s master, declaring that “hanging might be a bit harsh” for him, but “somebody has to pay” for the disaster.

In reality, it is governments of all stripes who are most culpable. Over the past two decades they have systematically deregulated basic industries such as shipping, removed or ignored health and safety guidelines, and cut funding to public bodies, such as Maritime NZ, so that they cannot carry out their proper functions. The condition of the Rena, which is owned by one of the world’s largest container shipping companies, is typical of the flag-of-convenience ships that now dominate the New Zealand shipping industry. The ship was so substandard that repairs had been ordered following half its inspections during the last 36 months.

Emerging evidence makes it clear that not only was an incident such as this likely to happen, the authorities were completely unprepared to deal with it.

The *Dominion Post* last week reported that the government’s Oil Pollution Fund—made up from levies collected from the maritime and oil industry—has been purposefully depleted “for years”. The fund, which will be completely used up paying for the Rena clean-up, stood at \$12 million a decade ago, but is now a paltry \$4 million. The former Labour government’s transport minister, Mark Gosche, a former union official, decided to drain the account in order to save money. Auckland University associate professor and maritime law expert Paul Myburgh called the decision to cut the reserves “foolish and shortsighted”, adding that successive governments had “placed little priority on the maritime environment”.

Such official indifference has been underlined by TV3 reports that for more than 20 years regular shipments of Australian “yellow cake”, containing low-

grade uranium, were transiting New Zealand ports to the US without any safety precautions in place. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) claimed that because the shipments were staying aboard the ships in port there was no requirement for them to get any consent. These rules were only changed in 2009 when MFAT started vetting the uranium shipments as part of new requirements for “strategic goods” under the Customs and Excise Act. The Environment Risk Management Authority also changed its practices at the same time, when it “became apparent” that the uranium fell within the scope of the Hazardous Substance and New Organisms Act.

The grounding of the Rena has also thrown the spotlight on government plans to proceed with offshore oil drilling near East Cape at the Raukumara Basin. Last week, 100 protesters surrounded the Rena response control centre to demonstrate their opposition to deep-sea drilling.

The group had earlier gathered outside Tauranga District Court to support fisherman Elvis Teddy, who was arrested for breaching the Maritime Transport Act after police boarded his boat in April amid protests against oil giant Petrobras. Spokesman Dayle Takitimu said the government should be held responsible. “The Bay of Plenty is no longer the plenty of anything except oil and it’s not good enough,” Takitimu said. “Rena is our big sign post to tell the rest of the world and the rest of the country that New Zealand is not ready to deal with oil spills.”



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