

Editorial: Delays in oil spill response don't inspire confidence

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A cormorant feeds in the oily waters of English Bay.

Photograph by: John Preissl, Special to The Sun

Wednesday's oil spill in English Bay provided an unexpected and unwanted real-life dry run for what happens when bunker fuel despoils a coveted Vancouver landscape.

The incident serves as a cautionary tale in advance of decisions regarding the Enbridge Northern Gateway project in northern B.C. and an expansion of the TransMountain pipeline to bring greater volumes of Alberta oil to Burnaby, the point from which many more oil tankers would depart en route to Asian markets.

British Columbians are understandably nervous about those plans because of the possibility of spills, on land and off the province's pristine coastline.

To be clear, oil shipments have been moving through Port Metro Vancouver for years without any spills,

and tankers of the future are to be double hulled and judiciously piloted by the Coast Guard.

But, as this week's mishap demonstrates, accidents happen. Thus it is crucial to have emergency responses and remedial procedures well in place.

It is worth noting that bulk carrier ships like the one believed to have leaked the toxic, highly polluting bunker fuel generally are not built to the standards of a modern supertanker.

It is only by good fortune that Vancouverites have not seen more spills from such carriers.

Those aboard the MV Marathassa, a Cyprus-registered bulk grain carrier, have been co-operative, but reportedly less than forthcoming, in assuming responsibility for the spill.

Thus, it will be instructive for taxpayers to watch how this plays out, whether the cost of this cleanup will be fully reimbursed.

As of Friday, authorities were reporting 80 per cent of the thousands of litres of fuel spilled had been recovered, providing some reassurance about cleanup procedures.

But a succession of delays that occurred in dealing with the spill are, appropriately, raising eyebrows.

While a slick was first reported to Port Metro Vancouver at 5 p.m. Wednesday, it took three hours for the Coast Guard to start containing the area, five hours to board the offending vessel, and seven hours for the private contractor, West Coast Marine Response Corp., to place a boom around the ship.

More alarmingly, 13 hours passed before the City of Vancouver was informed of the accident, at 6 a.m. Thursday.

It was only at that point that the city called in Vancouver Police and Fire and Rescue marine units, and alerted city staff, park rangers, biologists and wildlife experts.

These delays took place right in B.C.'s largest urban area, inviting questions about what might transpire for a spill along a remote section of the province's coastline?

Premier Christy Clark and Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson both characterized the cleanup effort as deficient and worrisome.

It is only when the public receives full assurances about cleanup capabilities and who assumes liability that they will be open to seeing more oil tanker traffic near B.C.'s ports, beaches, harbours and picturesque coastline.

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