

Russia probes pollution off Pacific coast after 'ecological disaster'

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A Greenpeace handout photo showing the area off Khalaktyr beach on the Kamchatka peninsula that may have been contaminated with toxic chemicals

Russian authorities Wednesday opened an investigation into suspected toxic waste pollution off the Kamchatka peninsula on its Pacific coast

which has led to the mass death of marine animals.

Locals sounded the alarm in late September as surfers experienced stinging eyes from the water and sea creatures including seals, octopuses and sea urchins washed up dead on the shore.

The Russian branch of Greenpeace has described the situation as an "ecological disaster", adding that as yet it remains unclear what has caused it.

Russia's Investigative Committee said in a statement Wednesday that a criminal probe had been launched over the "violation of rules of handling substances and waste dangerous for the environment" and the "pollution of the marine environment".

"The initial studies of probes from the [coastal waters](#) suggest the presence of a pollutant in the seawater similar in consistency to industrial oil or another substance containing oil components," it added.

The investigators are examining "all potential sources of the water pollution including the territory of military training grounds" adjacent to the polluted areas where toxic chemicals are buried.

In a statement released on Wednesday, Greenpeace said that it collected for analysis starfish and [sea urchins](#) that were found dead on the beaches.

"The [harmful substances](#) that poisoned them should have remained in the tissue of the animals" to allow examination, biology expert Vladimir Rakov was quoted as saying by the NGO.

He said relatively few fish and squid had died because these animals move quickly and they "felt that something was wrong".

Several days ago, residents of Kamchatka reported an unusual number of dead marine animals washing up on the beaches of the Pacific coast.

Scientists who analysed the waters and the beaches suggested that up to "95 percent" of marine life living along the seabed in the affected area had died.

Coming on the heels of a massive oil leak in Siberia, the latest incident has sparked a large-scale investigation with fears that poisonous substances in underground storage since the Soviet era could have leaked into the [water](#).

Kamchatka governor Vladimir Solodov has said the most likely source was the Kozelsky site, 35 kilometres (20 miles) outside the region's main city Petropavlovsk-Kamchatksy and used since the Soviet era to store poisonous substances deep in the ground.

In a meeting with the governor on Wednesday, Greenpeace said its representatives told Solodov the site had to be reclaimed "irrespective of the cause of" the pollution.

According to the Interfax news agency, the site stores some 100 tonnes of poisonous [substances](#) and pesticides, including some 20 tons of arsenic compounds, buried from 1979 to 1982.

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