

Australian oil spill '10 times worse' than thought

March 14 2009



Council workers use heavy machinery to remove contaminated sand in Coolum, Queensland. Dozens of popular tourist beaches on Australia's northeast coast have been declared a disaster zone, with their once-pristine sands fouled by a massive oil and chemical slick.

An oil spill polluting popular tourist beaches on Australia's northeast coast is 10 times worse than originally reported, according to the state government.

Dozens of beaches have been declared disaster zones after they were fouled by a massive [oil](#) slick spilled from the Hong Kong-flagged ship Pacific Adventurer in wild seas on Wednesday.

Initial estimates put the spill at 20-30 tonnes of oil but "it is now apparent that it was about 230 tonnes," Queensland state's Deputy

Premier Paul Lucas told public radio.

About 60 kilometres (almost 40 miles) of beaches have been hit by the oil, with Moreton Island about 40 kilometres off Brisbane city the worst affected.

The crisis was sparked when high seas whipped up by Cyclone Hamish toppled 31 containers of ammonium nitrate fertiliser from the ship's deck.

As they fell, the containers punctured the hull, before taking 620 tonnes of the explosive chemical to the [ocean](#) floor.

The ship's owners, Swire Shipping, said an inspection of the hull by a diver on Friday had found that the damage was greater than initially believed and "it is likely that substantially more oil has spilled than the earlier estimate".

Swire faces 1.5 million dollars (977,000 US dollars) in fines if found guilty of environmental or maritime breaches

"The company very much regrets the environmental impact caused as a consequence of the vessel being caught in Cyclone Hamish," it said.

"The company and its insurers will meet all their responsibilities."

Swire had to launch a separate clean-up effort Friday after the ship docked and leaked more oil into the river running through Brisbane, Queensland's capital.

Apart from the [oil damage](#), experts fear the fertiliser could cause [harmful algal blooms](#), suffocate fish and kill natural habitats.

Moreton Bay, a marine sanctuary, is home to a range of [sea birds](#) as well as turtles, dolphins and pelicans.

Hundreds of people are working to clean the beaches and save affected wildlife.

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