

Title: The use of Fishing Vessels to respond to pollution incidents in the UK North Sea

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Abstract

A major oil spill is obviously a serious potential environmental and socioeconomic concern for all, but especially for those who make a living from the sea – with fishermen being key stakeholders in the marine environment and viewing themselves as custodians of the sea, it seems logical that they be given the opportunity to assist in the response to pollution related incidents.

Historically, if an offshore response was required to a pollution related incident in UK waters, the relevant person's responsible for the response/clean-up would go the charter market and obtain oil industry related vessels such as Platform Supply Vessels (PSVs) and/or Anchor Handler Tug Supply (AHTS) vessels to be used as response vessels. Over recent years for various reasons there has been fewer vessels available, and they may have to travel from further afield to get to an incident area. This may delay or otherwise change how a response is actioned. With regards to oil spill response activities, these vessels would typically be used as spill monitoring and sampling platforms, boom deploying and towing vessels, dispersant application platforms, etc. As an example, a spill offshore of a persistent crude oil, with the currents and weather driving the slick(s) towards a coastline, a response may require two boom systems (which may require two vessels per system), two dispersant application vessels, a fluorometry and sampling vessel to support both vessel and aerial dispersant activities and also a command vessel. In total, this example would require eight vessels to be mobilised. If using PSV and AHTS, it might take time to source these vessels and they may come with minimal oil spill response training, thus requiring trained responders to accompany each vessel during its operations which could be deemed an inefficient process. Having vessels with trained crews available and a mobilisation procedure in place would reduce the risk of a slow or limited response as both vessel and trained responder availability is mitigated.

The UK fishing industry has a long history of supporting the offshore oil and gas industry in their day-to-day operations (guard vessels, survey platforms, etc) and have had some involvement with oil spills in the past, but they have not had a formal role to play in oil spill response situations and no procedures are in place as to how they could be mobilised.

Internationally, there are a variety of examples of fishing vessels and corresponding crews being trained and made available to respond to oil spills. One example of this is the fishing vessel oil spill response training that is carried out in Prince William Sound (Alaska)¹. This programme maintains a database of

¹ *Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council, 2022.*

fishing vessels in the area that can be utilised for oil spill response activities. Crews are trained and refresher trained each year to maintain response familiarisation and to keep up to date with new technologies. Training is planned around the fishing season to minimise impact on the fishing industry. Other examples include the fishing fleets that assist the Norwegian Coastal Administration with nearshore and at-sea responses, and also the fishermen of the Mar Atento Project in Brazil, that support nearshore and onshore responses. Using experience and evidence from these examples and other global projects, has allowed consideration for how a fishing vessel service could be established within UK waters. The regulatory and industry requirements were considered, and a suitable training regime for the fishing vessel crews was developed.

The original concept of the UK fishing industry being utilised to respond during an oil spill was developed within Shell UK Ltd. The Shell UK Social Performance/External Relations Advisor, being aware of the various schemes around the world, contacted the UK fishing industry, specifically the Scottish Fishermen's Federation (SFF) to ascertain if they would be interested in getting involved in a potential response service. The SFF were very keen to take part and agreed to collaborate on the delivery of a proof-of-concept exercise. This joint exercise, also involving Oil Spill Response Limited (OSRL) and the UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) took place during March 2020 in Fraserburgh, Scotland. During the exercise, response equipment including booms, dispersant application systems and dispersant efficacy test kits were successfully deployed from fishing vessels. Once the exercise was completed, the concept of a UK based fishing fleet response service was presented to the members of Oil and Gas UK (OGUK)² to gauge the level of interest in such a service being set up. The industry felt that having this service in place would not only provide another credible oil spill response option during an incident, but would also allow other stakeholders of the marine environment (i.e. the fishing industry) to provide valuable experience and resources in an efficient manner during a response.

Therefore, through a collaborative process there is now a service in place that provides that formal structure and mobilisation process to mobilise trained fishing vessels to enhance an at sea response to a pollution related incident should it be required.

² Now Offshore Energies UK (OEUK).