

14th December 2009

Dr. David Borthwick
Montara Inquiry
P.O. Box 1564
Canberra 2601

RE: Submission to The Commission of Inquiry – Montara Well Head Platform Uncontrolled Hydrocarbon Release

Dear Sir,

We are advised that up to 23 million litres of oil and condensate leaked into the Timor Sea off the Kimberley from August 21 to November 3 due to activities by the Thai company, PTTEP. This company took 74 days to plug the oil flow, and spent 3 weeks towing a repair rig to the site whilst declining the offer of another rig nearby.

1. There appear to have been no Government or regulatory “INCENTIVES/FINES” to encourage this indolent, disorganized company to respond much faster. As a result, 74 days later, we now talk about this incident as Australia’s third largest oil spill. What sort of government do we run in this country, when we allow foreign companies to buy our resources and stand idly by while they muddle through a “fix up” process like this ?

By way of comparison, the 1989 Exxon-Valdex oil spill in Prince William Sound Alaska, resulted in an oil slick covering 3,400 sq km. This oil spill covered 50,000 sq km !

Petroleum is naturally digested by specialised bacteria within the environment, at a rate which depends on a number of factors including volume, wave-action, sea temperature, weather conditions etc. Common US practice is to leave the oil alone so that it breaks down by natural means, where there is no possibility of significant pollution to an area.

For example, the clean-up of Prince William Sound after the Exxon-Valdex oil spill, using solvents, surfactants, dispersants, and hot water, resulted in a worse mix of toxic chemicals that killed even more microbes, spawning coral, and marine life in general, and was subsequently highly criticised by leading scientists. So the efforts of the Australian Maritime Safety Authority in applying in excess of 50 tonnes of chemical dispersants including Tergo R-40, Ardrox 6120, Corexit 9500, Corexit 9527, Slickgone NS, and Slickgone LTSW to the spill seems retrogressive.

2. **In view of the 400 barrels leaking per day from a single source, the Montara Well Head Platform, why were PTTEP not immediately obliged to contain the spill with booms and collect it from the water surface using skimmer equipment ? Oil floats on water and initially forms a slick that is a few millimeters thick. This could have massively reduced the impact of the spill. Yet PTTEP did nothing, and the Federal Minister of Mines and Energy dissembled and mouthed platitudes, rather than request immediate action ! Perhaps the next oil company that has an accident or explosion like this will also “pretend to care” too, and maybe it will take 174 days. Will our Minister still dissemble and mouth platitudes toward the company ? Will our Minister make efforts to find out the scope of the incident, and fully report the magnitude of the problem to the Australian people promptly and truthfully ?**

I strongly believe there should be no further expansion of the petroleum industry on the North-West shelf of Australia's Kimberley region until such time as:

1. A network of marine parks with large sanctuaries is established in the Kimberley region to serve as protection from events like the West Atlas oil spill (Term of Reference 10);
2. It can be shown that proposals for expansion of the North-West petroleum industry are fully compliant with binding national climate change policies and targets (Term of Reference 11);
3. Faster response time mechanisms and improved oil spill procedures are developed and adopted – with strong independent compliance enforcement. (Term of Reference 8)

Yours Sincerely,

Michael Kiddle