

Nature still reeling from New Zealand Oil Spill

Title

One year on from the Rena disaster, independent conservation organisation Forest & Bird (BirdLife in New Zealand) is still concerned at the ongoing environmental impacts of the oil spill, unrecovered containers and the shipwreck. Forest & Bird Central North Island Field Officer Al Fleming says 350 containers from the ship have not been recovered. “These containers are breaking down, possibly releasing debris and toxic chemicals into the marine environment. “The wreck is still on the reef, and Forest & Bird is concerned at possible pollution of the Bay of Plenty waters from this. Before deciding on whether the Rena wreck should remain, we would like to see an assessment of the environmental impacts,” Al Fleming says.

The loss of an estimated 20,000 birds when 350 tonnes of heavy fuel leaked from the grounded ship has had a terrible effect on populations of many species of birds that live in the Bay of Plenty and further afield. “Bay of Plenty beaches, estuaries and harbours are important nesting sites for many of our shorebirds, including oyster catchers and terns,” Al Fleming says. The impact of the oil spill on the local New Zealand dotterel population has been of most serious concern. “Dotterels are a threatened species with a population between 1500 and 1800,” says Al Fleming. “After the Rena disaster, 60 adults were removed from Bay of Plenty beaches. Five died from a lung infection while in captivity. No eggs or chicks were removed from the beaches so they were lost as well. This is a significant loss when you’re talking about a small population of birds.” Forest & Bird is working with central government, the Bay of Plenty Regional Council and WWF-NZ on a three-year Bay of Plenty Shorebird Protection Programme to re-establish shorebird populations devastated in the oil spill. Work has already started on pest control, habitat restoration, an education programme in schools, and raising public awareness of threats to our native shorebirds. “This year’s breeding season and the success of the shorebird protection programme is critical to the long-term recovery of bird populations,” says Al Fleming. Forest & Bird is continuing to work with Rena operator Costamare and insurer the Swedish Club to create a fund for the long-term recovery of the region’s environment. Al Fleming says the oil spill was a tragedy for nature, and Forest & Bird supports the independent review being launched to ensure our environment is safeguarded from future disasters. “I hope the lessons from the Rena can teach us how to avoid other potential environmental catastrophes if we pursue offshore oil and gas drilling.”