

New Zealand must wake up to oil spill dangers

Title

Forest & Bird (Bird Life in New Zealand) has said the unfolding oil spill disaster in the Bay of Plenty is a stark warning about the potential catastrophe that could result from deep sea oil drilling in our waters. “Forest & Bird believes the Rena disaster raises serious questions about our preparedness for an oil spill anywhere in our waters”, Forest & Bird Advocacy Manager Kevin Hackwell said. “In light of this disaster, the government needs to urgently rethink its plans to expand offshore oil and gas drilling.”

Maritime New Zealand has a responsibility under the Marine Transport Act to maintain the ability and equipment needed to respond to marine oil spills of all types and sizes. The apparent inability to deal with an oil spill close to Tauranga – initially in good weather – raises important questions about how well Maritime New Zealand has met its statutory responsibilities. “Authorities were unable to prevent New Zealand’s worst ever maritime environmental disaster unfolding from a grounding of a ship close to New Zealand’s busiest port”, he said.

The Rena oil spill suggests New Zealand would be incapable of coping with an oil spill resulting from deep sea oil exploration or production. “Clearly we would not have the resources to cope with a major oil spill involving an oil tanker running aground or as a result of oil drilling accident offshore”, Kevin Hackwell said. “When the immediate crisis is past, it is crucial we have a full inquiry into why the response was apparently so slow to get underway. We need to learn the necessary lessons to ensure we are better prepared in the future.”

There should be a moratorium on all deep sea oil drilling proposals until the results of an inquiry were known and its recommendations implemented. “The damage to the Bay of Plenty’s coastal environment will be long lasting and it will be a long time before the area loved by so many New Zealanders is restored to the way it was. The ongoing financial and environmental costs will be a bitter but important lesson for us all.”

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