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Environmental Advocates, Federal Agencies Criticize State-Run Oil Company PEMEX for Inadequate Response to Oil Spill off Coast of Oaxaca

by Carlos Navarro

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The sinking of a loading buoy off the seaport of Salina Cruz in Oaxaca state on Aug. 11 has contaminated several beaches in the area with spilled crude oil, endangering local wildlife and damaging the local fisheries and tourism industries. The environmental organization WILD Coast/COSTASALVAJE said the spill from the buoy owned by the state-run oil company PEMEX killed at least two dozen Olive Ridley turtles during the nesting season.

The loading buoy—one of several offshore installations used by PEMEX to load oil on to tanker ships at sea—sank near the Salina Cruz refinery, causing oil to spill into the Gulf of Tehuantepec.

Turtles killed during nesting season

WILD Coast/COSTASALVAJE said the spill occurred at a very sensitive time for the hundreds of thousands of Olive Ridley turtles that were arriving to nest on Morro Ayuta beach, which had been polluted with oil residue.

"The beaches of southern Oaxaca are Mexico's most important for nesting Olive Ridley sea turtles and surfing tourism," said Eduardo Nájera, the Mexico director for WILD Coast/COSTASALVAJE.

"We are asking that Mexican federal authorities investigate the cause of the spill and require PEMEX to quickly and thoroughly clean up its mess."

WILD Coast/COSTASALVAJE demanded that PEMEX "assume its responsibility for the environmental damage caused by the spill of 18,000 liters (about 4,750 gallons) of oil" and coordinate cleanup actions in coastal communities in compliance with "all necessary health and safety measures."

"PEMEX must be required to clean up and restore all of the ecosystems damaged by the oil spill to the fullest extent possible," said Nájera. "Indigenous communities, families, and businesses that make their living from fishing, surfing, and eco-tourism must be compensated for their losses as a result of damage from the spill."

The federal environmental protection agency (Procuraduría Federal de Protección al Ambiente, PROFEPA) is also looking into the damage caused to other nearby beaches, including Salinas del Marqués, Brasil, Brasilito, Azul, Punta Conejo, La Escondida-Guelaguichi, Playa Cangrejo, and Chipehua.

A PROFEPA investigation found that the indecisiveness of PEMEX personnel in Salina Cruz exacerbated the problem. Officials said the PEMEX staff on the ground did not know what measures to take to prevent the crude oil from spreading once the buoy was sunk.

"Additionally, the state-run oil company failed to report the spill in Salina Cruz to PROFEPA, as required by law," said Sergio Herrera, one of the agency's officials in charge of industrial

inspections. "Evidently, this complicated the capacity to react to the accident on the part of agencies at all levels of government."

PEMEX eventually put together a report on the incident to PROFEPA, but this came much too late to prevent significant damage. "We received the report...10 days after the incident occurred," said Herrera.

Spill hurts local fishing, tourism industries

The spill has affected the livelihoods of people who earn a living in the fisheries and tourism industries in and around Salina Cruz. This prompted the Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) to launch an "ex-officio" investigation. In a preliminary assessment, the CNDH described damage to the wildlife that inhabits area lagoons and beaches as "worrisome." Additionally, the commission expressed concern about the negative impact on the local population that depends on fishing.

"Because of the importance of this matter, CNDH personnel traveled to the site to measure the environmental damage and assess the economic impact on the local population," the commission said in a statement.

The environmental organization Greenpeace México, which sent its own inspectors to Salina Cruz to assess the situation on Aug. 23 and 24, detected numerous oily spots on the beach in Playa Cangrejo, as well as contaminated water in the area's lagoon. The report filed by Greenpeace inspectors said the smell of oil-based chemicals continued to permeate the area.

Some local residents took matters into their own hands, detaining two PEMEX officials in Salina Cruz for about 10 hours in a dispute over cleanup procedures. Residents were trying to extract a promise from PEMEX to hire 1,800 local residents to help with the cleanup of the beaches. PEMEX was only offering only 180 contracts, which is one-tenth of the total requested. "As a result of the incident, PEMEX officials and Oaxaca state authorities agreed to form a dialogue panel with the affected fishers in the capital of Oaxaca City, with the director of Pemex Refinación in attendance," the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal reported on Aug. 27.

But Greenpeace México said the problem extends beyond the incident at the Oaxaca community. The organization criticized PEMEX for its inability to prevent and react to oil spills. During this year alone, Greenpeace México has documented 53 spills of hydrocarbons, which have caused significant damage to the environment. "PEMEX has demonstrated many times that it lacks an efficient plan to respond to spills and environmental emergencies," the organization said in a statement. "The most recent proof of this is the spill that occurred in Salina Cruz, Oaxaca, on Aug. 11."

There have been numerous oil spills in the past decade at PEMEX wells and other facilities. Some have received little national publicity, but other large spills have made the headlines because of the magnitude of damage to the environment, including incidents in Tabasco, Veracruz, and Campeche states ([SourceMex, April 9, 2003](#), [Jan. 5, 2005](#), and [Oct. 31, 2007](#)).

In 2005, the Chamber of Deputies approved legislation to allow PEMEX to keep a larger share of its revenues. The increased financial flexibility was intended in part to help the company upgrade aging pipelines and other infrastructure, which in turn would minimize spills and other accidents ([SourceMex, July 20, 2005](#)).

The oil company, in the meantime, continued marine operations to recover the sunken buoy. PEMEX officials said they are investigating the causes behind the sinking of the buoy, but preliminary information indicates that adverse weather, including high waves, might have contributed to the accident.

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