

Preventing black tides in the Black Sea: first EMSA oil spill preparedness exercise off the Bulgarian coast

Lisbon, 10 March 2010. How can Europe protect the coasts of Black Sea from oil spills, in the face of rising oil exports from the Caspian Sea region? Today, the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) is participating in an oil pollution response exercise organised off the port of Varna by the Bulgarian Maritime Administration. Two EMSA-contracted oil spill recovery vessels are taking part: the GSP Orion and Santa Maria. This is the first time this type of exercise has been conducted in Bulgaria, with the aim of testing the coordination and cooperation between EMSA's contracted vessels and Bulgarian oil spill response resources.

"We need to better protect the Black Sea", says Willem de Ruiter, Executive Director of the Lisbon-based European Maritime Safety Agency. "This is a sea area known for its fragile marine environment, and it plays a vital role in enabling waterborne trade across Central Europe and beyond, linking to the Danube river, major oil ports and high-density marine traffic chokepoints such as the Bosphorus and Kerch Strait. The Black Sea is surrounded by countries that either export oil or facilitate the transit of oil, and so a risk of a major oil spill exists, most recently illustrated by a major oil pollution incident in the Kerch Strait in November 2007. As in other European waters, EMSA has contracted an oil spill response vessel in the Black Sea to 'top-up' the resources already in place at Member State level to respond to potential oil spills. The *GSP Orion* is an EMSA-contracted vessel based in Constanta. Should an oil spill occur, it is available to help protect the coastlines of Bulgaria and Romania within 24 hours. Furthermore, the vessel can also be made available within 48 hours to recover oil across the entire Western Black Sea, roughly half of the Black Sea's surface area."

Two EMSA-contracted vessels are taking part in the exercise, which is being held in the vicinity of the Bulgarian port of Varna. *Santa Maria*, a bunker vessel with tank capacity of 2,420 m³ is usually stationed in Malta. The *GSP Orion*, a supply vessel with a capacity of 1,330 m³ has her home port nearby in Constanta, Romania. This marks the very first exercise between EMSA and the Bulgarian Maritime Administration. In the afternoon, an 'open ship' event at the passenger terminal in Varna enables interested members of the public and media to visit the vessels and receive more detailed information about the vessels, and demonstrations of the oil spill response equipment onboard.

Uniting all actors to prepare for the next black tide

In accordance with Regulation 724/2004/EC, EMSA has established a network of stand-by oil spill response vessels across Europe. This network covers all the regional seas in Europe, and the recovery vessels are strategically distributed along the European coastline to boost national capabilities, to plug perceived gaps, and to provide effective and efficient assistance to Member States when requested. The EMSA pollution response vessels thus provide a 'European tier' to provide assistance to coastal States if an oil spill incident exceeds a Member State's own capability to respond.

To ensure an appropriate level of service, EMSA's contracted vessels participate in regular training activities and drills. These are designed to verify and improve the operation of the onboard equipment, including the testing of equipment such as booms, skimmers and oil slick detection radars. Together with national maritime authorities – national coast guards, port administrations, search-and-rescue organisations etc. – EMSA's vessels also participate in wider exercises involving larger-scale marine disaster preparedness activities. The result is to improve cooperation among all actors who, when an accident happens, will be better prepared to respond to, and limit the damage of, an oil spill at sea.

Pictures of oil spill response activities and a vessel network map are available on request. For more information, please contact EMSA External Communications:

- Louis Baumard: louis.baumard@emsa.europa.eu
- Peter Thomas : peter.thomas@emsa.europa.eu

EMSA website: www.emsa.europa.eu



Location of EMSA contracted oil pollution response vessels.