



The Gulf Region comprises the Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman, thereby extending into the Arabian Sea. It encompasses the states of Bahrain, Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The area is endowed with valuable natural resources; the top five countries with the highest proven oil reserves are located within this region, and Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates represent three of the top ten oil producing nations of the world.

This Gulf region has a great biodiversity of plant and animal species. Its productive marine environment supports more than 1000 species of fish, most of which are endemic and have a high commercial value. The coast is characterised mainly by exposed sandy beaches separated by rocky headlands. Whilst seagrass beds are not common, mangroves are abundant to the west and southwest with many green turtles and dugongs present. The area has increasingly been opened up to tourism. However, investigations of marine environmental quality by satellite imagery suggest that the Gulf Region and Gulf of Oman have a significant burden of chronic pollution.

THE RISK OF OIL SPILLS

Over 45% of the world's seaborne crude oil trade passes through the Strait of Hormuz from Gulf country production. Despite the significant volume of oil transported through the region, there have been relatively few major accidental spills from tankers, partly because there are relatively few navigational hazards. The primary concern with regard to navigation in the region is in relation to collisions resulting from traffic congestion, in particular in the area of Fujairah and other oil loading and bunkering facilities. Traffic separation schemes have been established in the approaches to and within the Gulf, and all of these schemes have been adopted under the International Maritime Organization, IMO.

The marine waters of the Gulf region are shallow, which can create potential problems for deep draft tankers steaming for considerable distances with limited under-keel clearance. In addition, prolonged winds in a constant direction can cause surges and a significant change in water depth, also creating potential navigational problems.

A summary of accidental tanker spills in the Gulf Region since 1974 is given in the table below. In addition, it is estimated that 840,000 tonnes of oil entered the marine environment during the Gulf War in 1991. More recently there have been concerns about the number of illegal discharges from the large volume of shipping within the region and the frequency of oil spills resulting from sub-standard vessels which were illegally transporting oil from Iraq. Unofficial records show that nearly 26,000 tonnes of oil entered the marine environment from these illegal operations.

Major tanker spills of over 5,000 tonnes in the Gulf Region since 1974

Vessel Name	Quantity spilled		Country	Year	Cause
	(tonnes)	(Type)			
NOVA	70,000	CRUDE	IRAN	1985	COLLISION
ASSIMI	52,500	CRUDE	OMAN	1983	FIRE/EXPLOSION
PERICLES G C	46,000	CRUDE	QATAR	1983	FIRE/EXPLOSION
SEKI	16,000	CRUDE	UAE	1994	COLLISION
PONTOON 300	5,500	FUEL (CARGO)	UAE	1998	SINKING

THE STATE OF PREPAREDNESS

Most of the countries within the region have some form of national contingency arrangements in place. However, for the United Arab Emirates there is only a draft oil spill response plan and reliance is placed on oil industry resources. In some countries where major oil companies are operating, the company plan also serves as the national contingency plan and is therefore exercised with some regularity. The majority of countries with contingency plans choose dispersants as a primary response tool. However, the application of dispersants is subject to compliance with relevant regional guidelines and national legislation.

Some countries have gained extensive experience in spill response techniques and are well equipped as a result of the Iran-Iraq War of 1983 and the Gulf War of 1991. Much of the response equipment available within the region was purchased at that time. The degree to which this equipment has been maintained and is available for response appears to vary.

There is a strong industry co-operative within the region in the form of the Regional Clean Sea Organisation (RECSO). Formerly known as the Gulf Area Oil Companies Mutual Aid Organisation (GAOCMAO), RECSO was formed by oil companies to provide a co-ordinated, mutual aid capability through pooling equipment and resources. However, due to reimbursement arrangements, the capacity to respond to third party spills is limited. Potential difficulties of facilitating the trans-boundary movement of equipment have not been fully resolved.

The equivalent government co-operative agreement, known as the Marine Emergency Mutual Aid Centre (MEMAC), is based in Bahrain and is funded by member countries of the Arabian Gulf Co-operative Council (AGCC). MEMAC coordinates government activities in the field of oil spill response and promotes mutual assistance similar to RECSO. Each member country has response equipment that can be used by MEMAC members and cleanup efforts can be co-ordinated centrally at the expense of the requesting country. However, there is some uncertainty over how efficiently the arrangements for co-operative search and rescue and emergency response would work in practice.

MEMAC was formed under the legal framework of the Kuwait Action Plan, which, under the Kuwait Regional Convention for Cooperation on Protection of the Marine Environment from Pollution and its Protocol (Kuwait Convention) developed in 1978, provided the impetus for the development of the Regional Organisation for the Protection of the Marine Environment (ROPME). The area covered by the Kuwait Action Plan has been designated as a "special area" under MARPOL. The Kuwait Convention aims to provide protection of the marine environment from all sources of pollution and to promote regional cooperation in marine environmental protection and emergency response management.



In addition to regional initiatives, the Petroleum Association of Japan has significant stockpiles located in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. This non-profit, trade association has a number of stockpiles strategically located along the tanker route from the Middle East to Japan. The equipment is available free of charge to anyone in need of assistance, subject to the equipment being returned clean and any damaged items repaired or replaced.

Further efforts to promote regional cooperation have been developed under the Regional Convention for the Conservation of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Environment (Jeddah Convention). The Jeddah Convention provides a UNEP founded framework for environmental cooperation with the region and establishes PERGSA (Programme for the Environment of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden).

Considerable improvements are currently being made with regard to the ratification of MARPOL 73/78 through the Regional Project to Promote Ratification of MARPOL 73/78 launched in 2000. Under this project a number of waste reception facilities have been established through private industry. Whilst at this stage only Oman is signatory to the Convention, it is anticipated that the majority of countries within the region will have ratified MARPOL 73/78 by the year 2004. Given the increased attention and regional co-operation, it is considered that the initiatives currently being developed within the region will act to significantly reduce the frequency of spills and quantity of oil entering the Gulf as a result of illegal activities.

Progress with regard to implementation of regional and international conventions over the past decade has been promising. With the exception of Iraq, the countries within the region have signed the Kuwait Convention promoting regional co-operation. As at October 2003, six of the eight countries have ratified the Civil Liability Convention, but despite the limited oil imports and high risk of pollution damage within the region, only four states have signed FUND '92.

STATUS OF CONTINGENCY PLANS, TIERED RESOURCES AND CONVENTIONS

	Competent National Authority	National Plan	Clean-up Resources		Subregional Agreement	MARPOL	OPRC '90	LLMC '76	CLC '69 CLC '92	FUND '92	Inter-vention '69/'73
			Tier 1	Tier 2							
Bahrain	Yes	1993	Yes	Yes	Jeddah Convention				'92	'92	
Iran	Yes	2001	Yes	Yes	Jeddah Convention		Yes				'73
Iraq											
Kuwait	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Jeddah Convention				'92		'69
Oman	Yes	1995	Yes	Yes	Jeddah Convention	Yes			'92	'92	'73
Qatar	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Jeddah Convention				'92	'92	'69
Saudi Arabia	Yes	1991	Yes	Yes	Jeddah Convention & Kuwait Convention				'69		
United Arab Emirates	Yes		Yes	Yes	Jeddah Convention & Kuwait Convention			Yes	'92	'92	'69

Date of issue: October 2003
Conventions updated: May 2004

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