OIL SPILL CONTAINMENT – IS GUYANA READY?

On 10th March 2025 the US chartered oil tanker, MV Stena Immaculate, carrying 220,000 barrels (35,000,000 litres) of aviation jet fuel, was at anchor about 10 miles off the coast of England when it was struck at night by a cargo ship, MV Solong [Figure 1], carrying a large quantity of sodium cyanide. This almost unbelievable and inexplicable event triggered a response by the relevant maritime authorities of the UK and contingency response plans were immediately implemented. The collision sparked a huge fire and the fears of environmental damage from the escaped fuel and chemicals, as well as endangering both crews, one of whom was sadly lost at sea.

Fig 1 - MV Solong

In the immediate aftermath, it was reported several high-speed ships and tugs were sent to the area under the coordination of the UK Coastguard. Whilst the rest of the crew of both vessels were rescued, it was several days until the fire was extinguished. The incident is still being investigated by the UK's Marine Accident Investigation Branch, but the collision indicates the threat of contamination at sea when ships carry large quantities of oil or oil related products and other hazardous chemicals. More recently in April 2026, the large fire at the oil refinery in Geelong, near Melbourne Australia, reminds us of the inherent danger of fossil fuel production and storage. Fortunately, no one was killed or seriously injured but the incident

highlights the hazards of oil extraction and refining in a time of soaring global oil prices as the current conflict in the Middle East continues.

Fig 1 – an oil spill containment boom in operation

On 28th May 2025, President Irfaan Ali signed into law the Guyana Oil Pollution Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Responsibility Act. The Act sets out key responsibilities at Part II for the response capability to an oil spill at sea in particular tasking the 'Civil Defence Commission' as the Guyanese 'competent national authority' for 'planning and coordinating of oil spill emergency responses by all agencies of the State' and it goes on to add 'oil spill incident training and drills' for such events. This is a tall order for CDC, although one might have thought much of the response capability would be in place already, given the long period active oil exploration and production to date.

At the 'Interpretation' of Part 1 of the Act, it would have been better to include under 'vessels' the common name for the ships and tankers involved in the extraction and transportation of oil, namely the 'Floating, Production, Storing and Offloading' ships, abbreviated to FSPO. These are designed to receive hydrocarbons produced by themselves or from nearby platforms, as well as store and process the extracted oil, and are one of the risks areas for an oil spill or contamination. Moreover, at the Interpretation part of the Act, it is spelt out that Guyana's 'national territory' includes the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) within which Guyana exercises sovereign rights over the deposits of oil that have been found, and where any oil spill is likely to occur. This area, some 125 miles offshore, is covered by the Act as the EEZ extends for another 200 miles beyond the 12 miles limit of Guyana's territorial waters.

At Part II of the Act, the ‘Competent National Authority’ is designated as the ‘Civil Defence Commission’ (CDC). It further directs that the CDC shall establish ‘National Oil Spill Committee’, which is at Part III of the Act requires there to be a ‘National Oil Spill Contingency Plan’, prepared by the relevant Committee of the CDC, as the ‘competent national authority’.

Part IV of the Act details the oil spill response. This part is composed of just four paragraphs, each of one sentence. If ever there was an occasion of the ‘Devil being in the detail’. So the Act, whilst having much detail on definitions and interpretations at Part I, comprises very broad broad-brush strokes at Part II and Part IV where it should cover the details of what is actually required. Surprisingly, there is no reference to the international standards necessary for Guyana’s response, such as those of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) guidelines for the ‘Use of Dispersants for Combatting Oil Pollution at Sea’, or the 1990 ‘International Convention on Oil Pollution Preparedness, Response and Cooperation’ (OPRC). The American Petroleum Institute (API), established as long ago as 1919, represents all segments of the USA’s oil and natural gas industry, and has developed over 800 standards for the industry. It is interesting to know that ExxonMobil has disengaged from the trade association API in 2022, apparently due to “misalignment on climate priorities and other policy considerations”. How ominous.

A good start for implementing the requirements of the recent Act, would be for CDC to consider the technical information paper for ‘Contingency Planning for Marine Oil Spills’ published by the International Tanker Owners Pollution Federation Limited (ITOPF). There are many other international laws, regulations and ‘best practice’ to be considered. Moreover, there is no specific onus in the Act on the commercial companies active in the exploration and extraction of oil to have the response and preparedness in place, to the industry standards that are well known.

Turning now to what the Act requires in practical terms, one needs to look no further than ExxonMobil’s own oil spill response field manual to see the details of the capabilities and response required, which comprises 16 chapters and 320 pages. The respect of copyright prevents whole or part re-publication here, however, amongst other requirements, the manual covers the use of booms and dispersants for containing oil spills, and that any response is to also be conducted in accordance with the applicable laws and regulations.

Fig 3 – close up of an oil spill containment boom

The use of booms and dispersants implies the availability and readiness of suitable marine craft able to operate where the FSPOs work in the EEZ, the most likely location for a spill. There is also the implied risk to the shoreline from any offshore spill such as to Shell Beach, a nesting site for four of the eight sea turtle species of the world, which would be an environmental disaster. From experience, the Coastguard of the Guyana Defence Force (GDF) and the Guyana Police Force maritime units, have no capability that could be put into effect for suitable contingency response plans for an oil spill at sea. This lack of capability needs considerable investment immediately.

ExxonMobil Guyana Limited (EMGL) own document 'Oil Spill Response Plan for Guyana Operations' is a comprehensive document covering just about everything one could imagine. As often is the case, however, the 'plan' ranges from high level corporate policy to low level use of anchor chains and detergents. Like the company's oil spill response field manual, it is really too unwieldy to be an actual 'on the ground' plan. It does refer to the need for 'site specific' plans, which is where the oil spill preparedness and response battle is fought and won. Guyana needs a confidence check these plans exist and are sufficiently resourced.

In August 2025, ExxonMobil deployed an additional, and the largest, FSPO vessel 'One Guyana', to operate at 'Yellowtail' in the Stabroek block, making a total of five FSPOs operating in Guyana's EEZ.

Fig 2 - FSPO vessel 'One Guyana'

This has allowed oil extraction to ramp up to over 900,000 barrels a day in April this year and it is estimated to achieve one million barrels a day by late 2026. With these developments, there has never been more important need to ensure an adequate oil spill prevention and combatting capability exists in Guyana. The public need reassurance that the plans required by the Act of 28th May last year are in place, and agencies are ready to respond. It is recommended that the CDC's 'National Oil Spill Committee' urgently reveal the substance of the 'National Oil Spill Contingency Plan' required by the Act and the details of the 'site specific' plans required by EMGL's own 'Oil Spill Response Plan for Guyana Operations'.