

When the cure is worse than the disease

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PANAJI, 21 AUG: The measures taken to curb the ill-effects of the oil spill off the Mumbai coast are suspected to have caused more damage to the environment than the spill itself.

The coast guard sprayed toxic chemical dispersants, continuously for seven days after the spill. Dispersants are generally used as the last resort only if a spill takes place far away from the coastline and the sea is too rough for surface management. According to Dr Srikant Fondekar, environment pollution expert and retired scientist with the National Institute of Oceanography, "Despite the spill happening quite close to the shore, dispersants were used. These surfactants need to be tested before use but in this case, even the type of dispersants used is still unknown to us."

Ideally, equipment like oil booms and skimmers should be used to manage cases like this. But according to a Coast Guard officer, random dispersants, that were at their disposal were sprayed straight-away into the sea, regardless of their toxic content. The oil spill happened after a collision occurred between *MSC Chitra* and *MV Khalijia* on 7 August. The incident has already damaged 40 per cent of the mangroves in the state of Maharashtra.

Coast Guard Commandant SS Dasila, said: "The area of the spill was not under the jurisdiction of the coast



guard. But, since Bombay Port Trust and Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust did not have the necessary infrastructure, we stepped in to help them." He said that, for seven days, *Chetak* helicopters conducted about 20 sorties and sprayed dispersants into the sea. He also said that booms were used to contain the spill.

However, Mr Devi Goenka, executive trustee of Conservation Action Trust, said: "The ships collided in the harbour inside the navigation channel, but the Coast Guard and the Maharashtra Pollution Control Board (MPCB), who are in charge of the area, did not do anything to address the issue for the first 24 hours." The authorities reasoned that the delay in the process of spill management was caused by the sea being choppy on the

day of the incident. But the following day, when the sea was quite calm, booms were still not used, he pointed out.

The process of oil treatment began almost 14 days after the ships collided. The Energy and Resource Institute (TERI) had offered their services to the government which would involve a strategy, using oil eating microbes, called Oilzapper Technology, just a few days after the spill. But, according to Dr Banwari Lal, director of environmental and industrial biotechnological division, TERI, almost 10 days were lost in deciding, getting clearances and inspections for the proposed method.

The MPCB has identified nine sites in Mumbai where oil from the spill has accumulated. TERI, has already started cleaning operations on Awas beach in Alibaug at the pilot site. An estimated 2,000 MT of the dirty, sand-oil mix that has infested parts of the coastline, would require only 10 tonnes of the bacteria powder to get cleaned up. 90 per cent of the affected area will be recovered in two and a half months, said Dr Banwari Lal.

Ironically, such indecision regarding adoption of methods, was seen even as a National Oil Spill Disaster Contingency Plan and Preparedness meet, presided over by the Director General of Indian Coast Guard, Vice Admiral Anil Chopra, had been held in Dehradun on 18 June.