—SAFEGUARDING AUSTRALIA'S COASTLINE—

THE AUSTRALIAN OIL SPILL RESPONSE PROGRAM

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INTRODUCTION

Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for inviting me to attend this very interesting and valuable symposium and to address you on the subject of the Australian oil spill response program.

In my address I will cover Australia's National Plan, the roles of my own organisation - the Australian Marine Oil Spill Centre -, give an example of an innovative cooperative arrangement and present a case study of the National Plan in action.

The oil industry is very aware of the impact of oil spills. First there is the significant damage that can occur to the environment. Then there is the dramatic impact that an oil spill can have on both the company involved and the image of the whole of the oil industry.

All parties - government, shipping industry, oil industry and the community would prefer that there were no incidents involving release of oil into the marine environment. Therefore prevention of incidents and spills is most important. Prevention can only be achieved by ensuring that platforms, pipelines, terminals and ships are well designed, well constructed, well maintained and well operated. Nevertheless the risk of an incident always remains, no matter how small. It is vital that there are credible and well planned arrangements in place to deal with the oil spill that may result.

Not all oil spills directly involve the oil industry. Almost all ships carry significant quantities of bunker fuel, regardless of their cargo. Oil also reaches the sea through discharges from shore based activity. It is therefore appropriate that government agencies take overall responsibility for oil spill planning and response.

However, no one organisation can deal with a significant oil spill on its own. This is particularly true for Australia, a large continent with a small population of 18 million, clustered around 37,000 kilometres of sensitive coastline. The size of Australia and the widespread activity means that cooperative arrangements are essential.

The National Plan to Combat Pollution of the Sea by Oil, established in 1973, links together Australia's Commonwealth and State governments and the shipping and oil industries into a cooperative arrangement, involving contingency planning, equipment, training, exercises and response.

THE OIL INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT

The oil industry in Australia has, of course, long recognised its responsibility for oil spill preparedness. Each company has plans, equipment and trained staff in place to deal with an oil spill.

The strength of individual company commitments to minimise the impact of an oil spill incident is significantly enhanced through mutual aid arrangements between the companies. In 1971, the oil industry, through the Australian Institute of Petroleum (AIP), set up a mutual aid arrangement to maximise the assistance that oil companies can give to each other.

In 1989, AIP carried out a comprehensive review of the marine oil handling activities in Australia. This review concluded that, while the risk of a major oil spill was slight, the severe consequences meant that it was highly desirable that a national response stockpile be available to supplement the existing government and industry resources.

Accordingly in 1991, AIP formed the Australian Marine Oil Spill Centre (AMOSC) at Geelong near Melbourne, as this national response centre.

The Centre, financed by ten oil companies, has the three main roles:

- First - response to marine oil spills with equipment and resources.

  AMOSC's warehouse stores approximately nine million dollars worth of response equipment, including booms, skimmers, storage, dispersant spray systems, washing systems and communications equipment. Pre-packaged equipment and 24 hour call arrangements ensure immediate road or air dispatch.

- Secondly - training in oil spill planning and response.

  AMOSC trains more than 350 people each year.

- Thirdly - administration of the oil industry mutual aid arrangements.

AMOSC operates with a budget of about one million dollars each year and has five permanent staff. Supplementary response resources come from a Core Group of forty-five highly trained staff seconded as required from the participating oil companies.

All oil and shipping companies in the Southern Pacific region are encouraged to support the AMOSC response and training services.

THE NATIONAL PLAN TO COMBAT POLLUTION OF THE SEA BY OIL

Returning to the National Plan, a number of issues including the formation of AMOSC prompted a fundamental review of this Plan.

The review resulted in changes to the Plan including:

- A refocussing of the National Plan, to achieve full coordination of government and industry for the first time. This has led to greatly improved understanding between government and industry and significant improvements to the preparedness of Australia for an oil spill response

- Clear definition of responsibilities, which is essential for any plan to operate effectively.

The National Plan responsibilities fall into two key areas:

1. Primary Agency

The Primary Agency has statutory responsibility for oil pollution matters in the area where the incident occurs. Therefore in all instances the Primary Agency is the appropriate Commonwealth or State Government authority;

2. Lead Agency

The Lead Agency has operational responsibility to take action to respond to an oil spill.

The review of the National Plan led to agreement of consistent Lead Agency arrangements for the first time.

Lead Agency responsibility is divided between the Commonwealth Government agency, State Government agencies and the oil industry. The oil industry is required to respond in the first instance to incidents at oil industry facilities.

In a major incident however, overall management by a government agency is usually appropriate.

- Development of cooperative arrangements.

  Regardless of which organisation has responsibility to manage an incident, all other agencies have agreed to assist.

  A key linkage in the cooperation between industry and government is the agreement between AMOSC and the National Plan. This agreement makes AMOSC and other industry resources available for any response, not just an incident directly involving the oil industry.

- Nomination of key government and industry response management staff

  All States, the Northern Territory and Commonwealth Governments have nominated senior persons to fill the role of Oil Spill Commander, who has overall responsibility for managing a response. In a complementary way to the appointment of Oil Spill Commanders, each oil company has nominated Senior Industry Advisers whose role is to represent the interests of the particular oil company that may be directly involved.

- Regular consultation between all parties, through the State and National Plan Advisory Committees.

  This regular contact between government and industry personnel ensures that personnel know each other well and trust is built up. In addition, these forums allow frank discussion of both government and industry concerns to achieve understanding and ensure resolution in a timely fashion.

The National Plan is managed by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority, a Commonwealth Government business enterprise and is directly funded by a quarterly levy placed on all commercial shipping, raising about $3.5 million each year.

The National Plan arrangements are not formally set down in legislation. An 'Administrative Arrangements' approach allows more flexibility than could be achieved by legislation.

FIXED WING AERIAL DISPERSANT SPRAYING

As an example of industry and government cooperation, an innovative arrangement for aerial application of dispersants using agricultural aircraft began in 1996.

The use of dispersants is an important response strategy, with dispersants applied by means ranging from back-pack sprayers to a system mounted in a Hercules aircraft.

In Australia, there is a substantial agricultural aircraft industry, with companies located throughout eastern Australia. These agricultural aircraft, with a capacity of about 2,000 litres each, are a very effective means of dispersant application.

A stand-by contract has been developed with a managing agency who ensures 100% availability of two aircraft, one located in Queensland and the other in South Australia.

Three additional aircraft are located at each of other locations in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. Availability of these aircraft is on an approximately 75% (or 275 days per year) basis, depending on fluctuations in agricultural flying requirements.

The above aircraft are contracted to respond within four hours of mobilisation. That is, the aircraft must be ready to leave base within four hours of being requested to respond to an incident. Up to an additional fourteen aircraft are also available as back-up on an 'aircraft of opportunity' basis.

The A$400,000 yearly cost of the contract is shared equally by the oil industry through AMOSC and the National Plan. This is a significant direct contribution by the oil industry in raising Australia's level of overall response capability.

THE NATIONAL PLAN IN ACTION - THE *IRON BARON* INCIDENT

An excellent example of the cooperative nature of the National Plan in action is the 1995 *Iron Baron* incident.

The 37,500 deadweight ton bulk carrier *Iron Baron* (not an oil tanker) ran aground on Hebe Reef, close to the mouth of the River Tamar in Northern Tasmania, on the evening of 10th July 1995. Wind speeds of 40 knots and swells of up to 4 metres made salvage operations difficult and initial efforts to refloat the vessel were unsuccessful. The *Iron Baron* had 550 tonnes of fuel oil on board and in the region of 325 tonnes was lost from the vessel shortly after the grounding. Fuel oil came ashore along the high water mark in spring tide conditions, affecting foreshores along the Tamar River estuary and open sea beaches. In addition, the incident had a significant impact on wildlife, particularly the species little penguin.

A major National Plan response was immediately mounted, involving both government and industry agencies. National Plan equipment, including oil recovery barges was air-lifted from the Eastern States and 23 tonnes of equipment, including booms and skimmers, was air-lifted from AMOSC in Geelong.

A substantial response organisation was set-up, using the National Plan model. The Lead Agency responsibility fell to the Tasmanian State Authorities, with the On-Scene Coordinator role filled by the Harbourmaster of the Port of Launceston Authority. Management positions within the response organisation reporting to the On-Scene Coordinator were filled by staff from state environmental agencies together with personnel from the Australian Maritime Safety Authority, agencies from other States, the shipowner and AMOSC.

The *Iron Baron* was refloated after 6 days aground, resulting in a further release of about 25 tonnes of bunker fuel. This oil moved westwards opening up a substantial new area of affected shoreline.

The *Iron Baron* incident was not the largest spill of oil in Australia and the volume of oil lost was small on a world scale of oil spills. However the oil spill response was the largest mounted under the National Plan, with nearly 500 people involved at the peak of the response clean-up activities. Overall approximately 25 kilometres of shoreline were affected by landed oil. This comprised a range of sand, pebble and rock beaches, much of which was difficult to clean as the heavy oil had become trapped in crevices and beneath stones. Wildlife recovery and cleaning was also a major activity with over 2,000 penguins and other wildlife treated in the centre set-up locally at the time.

An independent review of the response to the incident concluded that the *Iron Baron* oil spill response was well planned, managed and sustained. Equipment and personnel resources were used effectively and planning of the response was well managed. Worth particular notice was the high level of integration and collaboration between Commonwealth, State and oil industry agencies and resources.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the oil industry in Australia has long recognised that it is important to be well prepared for an oil spill and has taken the initiative of forming the Australian Marine Oil Spill Centre.

Australia's overall oil spill plan, *the National Plan to Combat Pollution of the Sea by Oil,* has recently been refocussed to ensure frill integration of all government and oil industry activities and improvements have been made to the definition of responsibilities and to organisation structures. There is now no doubt that Australia's preparedness to deal with oil spills is internationally recognised as a model of balanced government and industry cooperation.

Even though there is always more to be done, the proven cooperative National Plan arrangements provide confidence that there is a sound capacity in Australia to deliver an effective response to oil spills.

Thank you.