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A-1
Page

Florida Times-Union

Beaches Leader

Navy Times

Oil spill chance a dark cloud over St. Johns

By Robin Lowenthal
Staff writer

Trouble looms over the St. Johns River as ships cruise the waterway daily.

Trouble in the possible spill of heavy, black goo or light, clear liquid. Bunkering oil, kerosene, home heating oil, gasoline, jet fuel, diesel and asphalt — 1.5 billion gallons of oil brought by tanker or barges to the river's mouth last year.

Records show that about 3,200 gallons of petroleum products have been spilled, leaked and poured into the waters of Northeast Florida this year. A few gallons here, several hundred gallons there. Nothing disastrous.

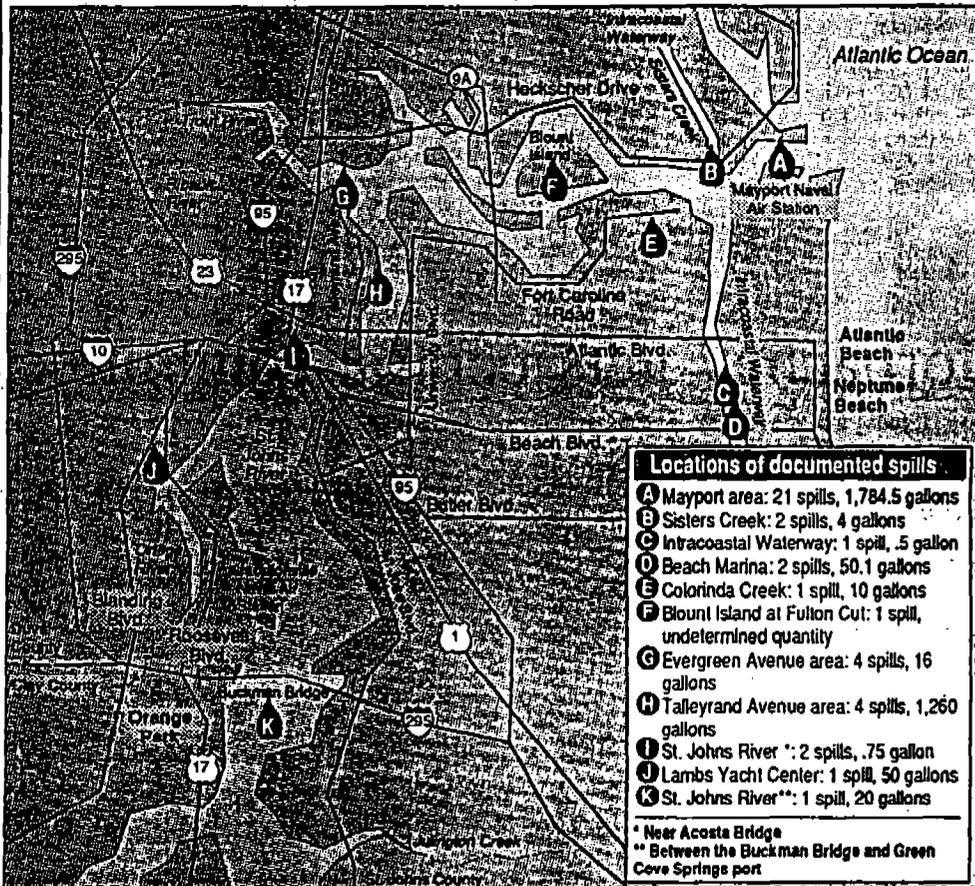
Still, the possibility of a calamity frightens those who monitor the river. "If you go for a short airplane flight and keep an eye out for big, round storage tanks, it's amazing what you'll see — all of them, up and down the shoreline," said Maj. Roger Bennett, who heads the Marine Patrol's Northeast Florida district office in Jacksonville. "And if I think of the quantity that's out there, the potential for a major spillage is here."

Florida made a significant step toward averting catastrophe when new spill legislation — introduced in the wake of the 11 million-gallon tanker spill of the Exxon Valdez — came law last month, Bennett and her environmental regulatory officials said.

The law increases safety requirements for ships and terminals, increases companies' financial liability for spills and sets up increased safety requirements for ships and terminals. "There are several penalties involved for repeat spillers, and at least one thing that's something that's been overlooked us," Bennett said. "Until this law, the same source could have spill after spill. They'd get a bad reputation, but they wouldn't get anything else." From now on, people or businesses

Petroleum product spills this year in Duval County

As of June 17, the Florida Marine Patrol has investigated 48 reports of petroleum product spills in Duval County along the St. Johns River and its tributaries. However, no spills were found at seven sites, and one other reported spill actually was a pesticide spill.



Major area oil spills

September 1986: The oil tanker Falcon Duchess, tied at the Bay Street docks in Jacksonville, leaked between 5,000 and 10,000 gallons of oil into the St. Johns River.
May 1987: About 8,000 gallons of oil spilled into the St. Johns River as Eastern Seaboard Petroleum, now Steuart Petroleum, loaded a tanker at its Evergreen Street facility in Jacksonville.
February 1987: The auto-carrier freighter Fempassat ran aground on the jetties at the mouth of the St. Johns River, leaking 300,000 gallons of oil.
June 1988: The dredge Crest sank during a storm in the middle of the St. Marys River channel off Fernandina Beach. The Crest leaked about 15,000 gallons of diesel fuel.

Compiled from Florida Marine Patrol reports

Petroleum product shipments

To Jacksonville ports in 1989
Asphalt: 3.2 million gallons
Diesel: 148.5 million gallons
No. 2 fuel oil: 197.2 million gallons
No. 6 fuel oil: 307.6 million gallons
Jet fuel: 20.6 million gallons
Kerosene: 33 million gallons
Gasoline: 797.5 million gallons

10F 2

Oil spill chances lessened by new laws

(From Page A-1)

spilling over 5 gallons more than once within a year could face a \$500 civil penalty for the second spill and up to \$1,000 for subsequent spills.

Recreational boaters also are targeted. The law allows courts to slap a \$50 penalty on those who repeatedly spill 5 gallons or less of gasoline.

Those small, repetitive spills — recreational and industrial — are the primary problem, said Bennett and Al McGough, Marine Patrol oil spill coordinator for the Northeast Florida region.

Between Jan. 1 and June 17 this year, Marine Patrol officers investigated 53 reports of petroleum product spills in Duval, Nassau and St. Johns counties along the St. Johns River and its tributaries. There were no spills reported in Putnam County.

But the reported spills are just a fraction of the true number of spills, Bennett said.

"If we tried to track down and document the source of every rainbow sheen we see out there, that's all we'd have time to do," he said.

Bennett and McGough said they worry about the cumulative effect of all those small sheens — petroleum droplets gradually building up in the vegetation, affecting the food chain and marine life.

"You can be slapped in the face a whole bunch of times before you fall down," McGough said. "But, eventually, you will fall down."

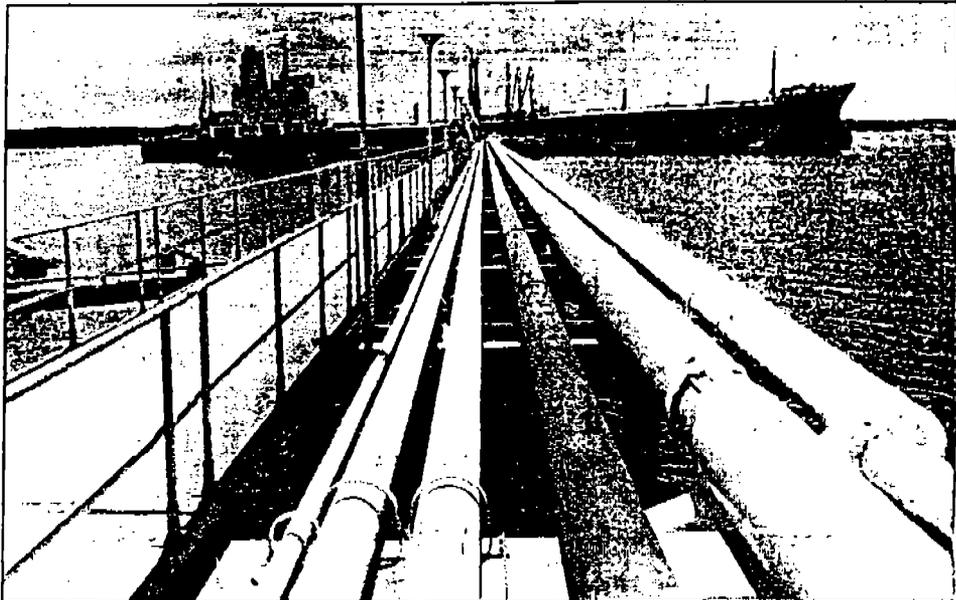
Ironically, the repeat-spiller penalties do not apply to the region's No. 1 spiller: the U.S. Navy. Governmental agencies are exempt from civil penalties, because government suing government is considered a waste of taxpayers' money, said Carolann Bowen, the Marine Patrol's state oil spill coordinator in Tallahassee.

Since January, Marine Patrol officers have determined the Navy was responsible for 14 spills that accumulated a total of 1,587 gallons, based on the conservative end of Marine Patrol estimates.

The spill from the tugboat Capt. Bill last month came close to that amount, with 1,200 gallons.

The only shipping terminals or marinas with more than one spill, as of June 17, were Stuart Petroleum Co. and Beach Marina. Beach Marina had a total of 50.1 gallons — a sunken vessel leaked 50 gallons of gasoline, and another docked vessel pumped out bilge water containing one pint of oil. Stuart had a total of 4 gallons spilled.

Despite the Navy's comparatively high spill record, a Navy official and Bennett said the circumstances facing the military and industry are dif-



— Ron Bell/STW

New requirements for boom systems during oil transfers will affect companies such as Stuart Petroleum Co. Tankers deliver about 4.2 million gallons of oil to its terminal each month.

ferent.

The Navy deals with aircraft carriers — each holding millions of gallons of fuel on board, said Lt. Bob Hines, a Navy spokesman at Mayport. The sheer volume of fuel that sailors must handle is a factor when comparing the Navy's spills to those of industries.

At one time, Bennett said, the Navy did have a poor attitude toward reporting and cleaning up spills.

In July 1989, for instance, the Navy reported that the USS Forrestal had spilled 100 gallons of oil into the Mayport harbor. However, an investigative report from the Navy's Judge Advocate General's Office said the spill was actually 1,200 gallons.

Since then, however, the Navy has had a change of command and cleaned up its act, Bennett said.

"I think they're really working on it. They definitely don't try to hide it anymore — if they have a teaspoon spill, they beat a hot path to that telephone," he said. "They've also improved their equipment with new containment boom. I don't think they've had a spill in the past year that hasn't been contained."

The new state law is especially geared for companies like Stuart — companies carrying a great potential for spills, Bennett said.

Stuart, formerly Eastern Seaboard Petroleum, is the largest of the 30 oil terminals in Northeast Florida. The

terminal's 20 storage tanks have a total capacity of 67.2 million gallons, according to Coast Guard reports.

Tankers deliver about 4.2 million gallons each month, while barges bound for plants north and south of Jacksonville ship oil products out about 50 times a month.

Spillers in the St. Johns as far south as Palatka would be subject to the increased penalties spelled out in the law. Department of Environmental Regulation officials said the protected area extends only to Palatka because waters south of that point are not navigable by large cargo hauling ships.

Potential penalties include fines of up to \$25,000, which could be assessed if shippers or terminals don't design oil spill response plans by Oct. 1. The plans must be certified by the state and must include spill containment equipment that can be rushed into use within one hour of a spill.

The law also increases the liability limits from \$14 million to \$50 million for transporters responsible for a spill.

Don Walsh, Stuart's operations manager, said his company does not object to the new law, although it will carry a price tag.

State officials will meet with Stuart this week to determine what the company will need to comply with the law.

Until now, Stuart — like most ter-

minals in the area — has turned to Jacksonville Spillage Control Inc. for spill cleanup and containment. The 25-member cooperative is designed to ease the financial burden of complying with environmental regulations by pooling resources to purchase cleanup equipment, said Earl Edenfield, executive director of the company.

But Walsh said Stuart Petroleum might decide to purchase its own containment material now that it will be required to boom each fuel loading.

Overall, Walsh said he understands the necessity of the new law.

"This is a small river. It won't take much to really mess this place up," he said. "A big spill would be disastrous."

As a result of the new law, Bennett said, each terminal now will have plenty of boom and cleanup equipment on hand, and dockhands will become familiar with its use. Everyone then will be more efficient if a major spill occurs.

If the worst-case scenario occurs, and millions of gallons of oil begin pouring into the St. Johns River, the law also doubles the potential state funds available for oil spill cleanup.

"This is one law where the additional effort and cost is probably worth it," Bennett said.

Staff writer Don Yaeger contributed to this report.