

## **Forced to Face Another Prestige.** Thoughts on how to avoid another oil spill

Greenpeace report. November 2012

### **Executive Summary**

Ten years ago the oil tanker Prestige sank off the coast of Galicia, Spain. The oil spill that followed was the largest environmental disaster in Spain's history.

The origin of the environmental disaster lies both in the accident itself and in our oil-dependent energy model but the main causes of the oil spill were a poorly managed situation from the start, institutional limitations, and legal loopholes that protected the interests of the oil industry.

The Prestige case goes to court in November 2012, a decade after the disaster, to clarify the responsibilities for the disaster. None of the companies involved is indicted, and only one person representing the Administration faces State-level responsibilities. (consider replacing after Administration with: faces charges for the responsibilities the State did not carry out.)

This report, written by Greenpeace *Forced to Face Another Prestige. Thoughts on how to avoid another oil spill* examines what the situation is like ten years after the disaster. Some of the issues in the report include: economic, legal and political liabilities; an evaluation of the permanent effects on the environment and human health; the evolution of oil dependency, as the origin of the spill disaster, and the availability of energy alternatives to replace oil.

Another reason for launching the report is to remember the episode in order to decrease the chances of a similar accident occurring. Therefore, the document also analyses how information on the spill was delivered to society and what role misleading information played in the management of the crisis and in social mobilization. It also examines institutional mistakes, negligence — such as the legislation or liability regime for the shipping industry — and the political decisions made before, during and after the accident that significantly influenced the magnitude of the disaster.

In writing the report, we have collaborated with experts from different fields, many of whom were witnesses to the catastrophe. Their insights and contributions allow us to reflect on the lessons to be learned from such an accident.

In the **Introduction**, Mario Rodríguez Vargas — Greenpeace's Spain Executive Director — recalls the role Greenpeace played ten years ago during the days, months and years of the environmental disaster. He explains what actions Greenpeace took, when and where. He finishes by examining what needs to be done and how to avoid another Prestige.

**Chapter One**, *Chronology of an Oil Spill*, details the events, actions and decisions that took place before, during and after the sinking of the Prestige. The chronology will help readers draw their own conclusions about the decisions made and the information made public.

In **Chapter Two**, *Prestige, a Tale of Lies*, Gustavo Catalán – a well-known reporter for his work on ecology and environmental issues who writes for the Spanish national newspaper *El Mundo* – details **how the media had to battle the Government to get information to a society “worried and which persistently demanded accurate information”**. He explains how the Government used different tactics to prevent information from getting out, including: not providing details of the disaster, prohibiting talking to government employees, and systematically and persistently repeating lies.

In **Chapter Three**, *Crisis Management, Liabilities Exposed*, Raquel Montón – Energy and Climate Change Campaigner at Greenpeace Spain – analyses **how the Prestige accident was managed. The accident brought to light the liability limitations in the case of an environmental disaster, especially the limitations of criminal and maritime law. The disaster also showed how lack of responsibility in the transport of hydrocarbons, flaws in maritime safety and rescue procedures, and inadequate preparations for fighting pollution made it very difficult to adequately manage a ship in a disaster. Finally, the oil spill also made evident the poor assessment of environmental impacts, the problems of providing information or communicating with the public, and the lack of means for combatting pollution.**

In **Chapter Four**, *The Days of the Prestige: Before, Throughout and After the Catastrophe*, Sebastián Losada — Oceans Policy Advisor at Greenpeace International — reflects on the time of the Prestige. **The before: oil spills are a consequence of our society’s dependence on oil and**, therefore, can be avoided by putting an end to our dependence. **The throughout:** due to the lack of information provided by the Government, **Greenpeace had to make a tremendous and tireless effort to compile accurate data. The after: to show that no lessons were learned from the accident** two examples — the sinking of the oil drilling rig *Deepwater Horizon*, in April 2010, and the current race to extract oil from the Arctic — are provided.

Losada also focuses on two positive lessons from the environmental crisis: the people willing to volunteer numbered in the thousands, and the disaster prompted the creation of a marine reserve sponsored by a Galician fishermen’s guild.

In **Chapter Five**, *Amid Crap and Hope*, Manuel Rivas — writer, poet, essayist and journalist — **reflects on the origin of the social movement created by the oil spill.** When a disaster of such scale takes place, people usually look to the Government for guidance, but since the authorities denied the magnitude of the problem, the volunteers, who wanted to cooperate in the Prestige crisis, were forced to organize differently. It became cathartic — a way to condemn the situation — and a means of expressing hopefulness.

In **Chapter Six**, *Consequences of the Oil Spill on Human Health*, Sara del Río –Toxics and

Pollution Campaigner at Greenpeace Spain – **examines the information provided by the Government when asked about the toxicity of spilled oil, and explains how Government officials always tried to minimize the problem, to hide information and to delay studies and analysis.** “Ten years later it is obvious that the effects were not evaluated as exhaustively as they should have and could have been” even though the studies carried out showed the risks of facing an oil spill without the proper safety measures and without following precise recommendations.

In **Chapter Seven**, *Environmental Effects of the Prestige Disaster*, Pilar Marcos –Coast Campaigner at Greenpeace Spain – describes the short- and long-term **ecological effects on the coastline** of the biggest environmental disaster in Spanish history. The oil spill polluted virtually all of the northern coast where many protected areas lie.

The short-term effects were visible during the catastrophe. The long-term effects, although less visible, do exist. The hydrocarbons from the Prestige spill are forever incorporated into the food chain and the ocean. It is significant that while writing this report no scientific data were found that provide a global picture of the effects of the oil spill.

In **Chapter Eight**, *Energy Lessons to be Learned from the Prestige*, José Luis García – Unit Head for the Energy and Climate Change Department at Greenpeace Spain – explains **why oil spills can only be avoided if we stop using petroleum, and analyses the possibility of living without this fossil fuel and the alternatives to oil.** Oil is utilized by the energy system. García studies the evolution of oil during the last decade and concludes that oil consumption grows at a smaller rate than global energy consumption. Specifically Spanish oil consumption has gone down while global energy consumption has gone up. Behind both events lies a common denominator: the diversification of energy sources, particularly the emergence of renewable energies.

After considering all the above points the main conclusions of the report are:

- **Political authorities were a disappointment** because of their failure to protect social and environmental interests.
- **The Prestige accident highlighted the great limitations of the legislation and liability regime of the shipping industry.**
- **Justice has not been done because no one has been required to accept liability and none of the persons in charge has been made responsible for the consequences of the accident.** Therefore, the world could be forced to face another *Prestige*.
- **The extent of the effects of the spill is unknown** since no comprehensive study has been carried out to describe, evaluate and quantify all the impacts of the Prestige oil spill.
- **Oil extraction, transportation and use cause irreparable, inevitable and permanent environmental impacts.** The energy system can replace the use oil with alternatives.

To end its actual oil dependence, Spain needs to change its energy model to one that

doesn't require tankers like the Prestige to sail the seas and permanently threaten the environment and people's livelihood with an oil spill.

Greenpeace asks that neither the people nor the ecosystems suffering the many effects of the Prestige oil spill be forgotten and that society and institutions give them the necessary support.