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Update on the oil spill in the Canary Islands

Oleg Neydenov, a Russian vessel carrying 1.409 tons of fuel, sank approximately 24 kilometers south of Maspalomas. The fishing vessel owned by Murmansk had already made headlines in 2014 when the vessel was seized by Senegal for three weeks for alleged illegal fishing in Senegalese waters. This time the vessel has made the front page as traces of shipping fuel from Oleg Neydenov have already been sited on protected tourist beaches on the Island of Gran Canaria. On April 11th the Russian trawler caught fire in a local port of Las Palmas and was towed out to sea as a precaution, a move severely criticized by environmental organizations. It is estimated that the Russian vessel is leaking around 5-10 liters of fuel into the sea every hour that goes by. Environmental activists claim that the area in which the vessel sunk has "deep-sea coral and a significant population of dolphins and turtles and that the spill is said to already stretch more than 100 km." The crew of 72 people has made it out safely but the question remains if sea creatures in the region will enjoy the same fate. Considering the scope of the spill and the lack of proper response by authorities it seems unlikely.

Shortly after the incident the Spanish government launched an investigation into the reason as to why the ship was towed out of the port. Environmentalists are at awe as to why this decision was taken. Oil spills are much more difficult to contain in open sea. On Saturday the 25th of April Spanish authorities activated a level 2 environmental emergency alert. They have done so after studying the ocean current, with the hope of preventing damage to the sensitive coastline in the region. Authorities have also sent an unmanned remote-controlled submarine 2.4 kilometers down to the vessel to see if the three holes in the ship could be blocked.

Whether towing the vessel out into the open-sea, which environmentalists, local politicians and individuals from the tourism industry largely doubt, was the right decision or not will remain for Spanish prosecutors to determine. The damage has been done and the ramifications of yet another spill will haunt the Island for years to come. Dolphins and other marine wildlife are already affected. The scope of the impact remains unknown.

Earlier in the year, the Spanish oil company Repsol stopped drilling for oil in the region most likely in response to intensive protests by the people from the island and national as well as international civil society organisations. The protesters raised concerns over the risks of an oil spill and its impact on the marine ecosystem and therefore the islands, too.

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Sources:

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