

The Province

No action taken against ship said to have dumped bilge off coast

Tue Apr 18 2006

Page: A3

Section: News

Byline: Christina Montgomery

Source: The Province

Illustrations: Colour Photo: Photos show hoses rigged to a bunker outlet on a German-owned ship last year, allowing oily water to be pumped directly into the sea.

Colour Photo: Jason Payne, The Province / International Transport Workers Federation inspector Peter Lahay says he was approached by a crew member of a ship alleged to have dumped oily water.

A bulk carrier that allegedly dumped oily bilge water off Vancouver Island has gone unpunished -- despite the fact crew tried to report the illegal act, The Province has learned.

The Opportunity was reported under a controversial new pollution law intended to make it easier to prosecute pollution of Canadian waters.

Bill C-15, the year-old federal law, allows for criminal prosecution of both the seafarers on vessels that pollute and the companies that own the ships.

Then-environment minister Stephane Dion introduced the bill in response to illegal bilge pumping, which kills more than 300,000 seabirds -- the equivalent of the Exxon Valdez disaster -- in Canadian waters each year.

Last September, a Sri Lankan serving as third engineer aboard the Opportunity approached Peter Lahay, a Vancouver inspector with the International Transport Workers Federation.

He told Lahay that since July he had been ordered three times to pump sludge directly overboard rather than into the ship's oily-water separator -- including once on

what he described as the approach to the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

The engineer asked that in exchange for testifying and producing the "magic pipe" used to bypass the separator, he not be prosecuted.

"He told me that he was ashamed to report that he himself had been required to pump the bilges three times. He said it would disgrace his mother and father and wife and children if they knew what he was doing to pollute the oceans," Lahay said.

After advising the man of the potential consequences of coming forward, Lahay contacted Jim Lawson, Transport Canada's regional director of marine safety, the next day. When Lawson could offer nothing but the faint hope that the courts might look favourably on the man, the seafarer refused to repeat his allegations and the ship sailed for China.

Lawson told The Province that without the name of the ship or the specific location of where the oil had been dumped, he could take no action.

Tipped by Lahay, officials from Cyprus, where the ship was registered, launched an investigation when the vessel arrived in

Guangzhao, China.

According to Andreas Constantinou, a senior official with Cyprus's department of merchant shipping, officials found the vessel's bilge was not properly connected.

They also talked to an officer who confirmed the pumping -- done, Constantinou said, under duress.

The Opportunity, whose owners in Dubai re-registered it in Panama, has returned at least once to Prince Rupert. No charges were ever brought against the ship or crew in Canada.

Disposal of oily water at sea remains a concern in Canadian waters on both coasts as ships continue to dispose of the sludge that builds up when engine oil leaks into bilges.

Ships are required to filter the mix through separators before dumping the cleaned water and then dispose of the captured oil ashore, but can save money by pumping the sludge illegally.

An enormous oil spill off the southeast coast of Newfoundland is under investigation this week. It is believed to have been caused by an oil tanker and has left more than 100 oiled seabirds in its wake.

As part of its investigation, The Province obtained photographs taken by a seafarer aboard a German-owned container ship off Newfoundland en route to Halifax last November. The photos show oil in ocean waters, a bypass pipe installed to feed sludge directly overboard and a seafarer swabbing down the side of the vessel after the pumping.

cmontgomery@png.canwest.com

© 2006 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.