

When the oil comes ashore

– has the Government ensured that municipalities are prepared?

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Executive summary

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The Swedish National Audit Office has examined how well the Government is managing to ensure good municipal preparedness to deal with oil coming ashore after major oil accidents. The review covers those Government measures that are primarily the responsibility of the Swedish Rescue Services Agency as well as the Environmental Protection Agency and the County Administrative Boards. The Government is ultimately responsible for these measures. The review is based on a questionnaire sent by the National Audit Office to coastal municipalities, a follow-up of the steps taken in recent years after large spills of oil on beaches, and other material.

Reasons for the review

There has been an increase in maritime transport of oil in the Baltic. Oil transports are expected to increase by 40% between 1995 and 2017. Ships have also become bigger, and the biggest tankers using the Baltic carry loads of 150,000 tonnes. Sweden and other countries have expressed concern that the transports are taking place using ships of inferior standard. The risk that Sweden will suffer a major oil accident is therefore much higher than it used to be, despite various countermeasures. The cost of decontamination after a very big accident could amount to several billion SEK. An accident could lead to serious damage to the environment, coastal industries and outdoor activities and recreation. Effective rescue and decontamination work, however, make it considerably easier to ameliorate the negative effects of an oil spill.

The Government sees preparedness for maritime accidents as a strategically important step in achieving the national objective for the marine environment. The Government and the Riksdag (Swedish parliament) have also laid down the objective that there is to be a rescue service in place that can contain the effects of any accidents that do happen.

Municipalities are responsible for the oil that reaches shore. The

Government is also responsible however, through the Swedish Rescue Services Agency (SRSA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the County Administrative Boards. The task of these public agencies is to provide support to municipalities so that they can achieve a high level of preparedness. They are also responsible for carrying out supervision to ensure that the municipalities are achieving Riksdag and Government objectives. There are two overarching objectives in this area: the objective concerning protection against accidents, which lies within the remit of the Ministry of Defence, and the environmental objective for the marine

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environment, coastal areas and archipelagos which lies within the remit of the Ministry of Sustainable Development.

Conclusions

When an oil accident takes place, municipalities have to make crucial decisions in a short space of time – there must be no doubt about who is to do what and what methods are most appropriate. The public agencies involved, above all the SRSA, have taken steps to achieve good municipal preparedness for oil spills. The review shows, however, that there are still shortcomings in municipal preparedness and Government support to this preparedness in a number of important respects.

Only a few municipalities have action plans

Municipalities are required by law to produce action plans for their rescue services containing assessments of what types of accidents the municipality risks experiencing. Most coastal municipalities in southern Sweden and mid-Sweden have carried out risk analyses for accidents that could lead to rescue measures. Of these, about two thirds have identified oil spills as a risk to the municipality. But under a third of the municipalities have a contingency plan for protection against oil damage. Several of these plans are incomplete, and many of them are outdated. This means that many municipalities have not taken the step from analysing the risks to planning for concrete measures to be undertaken in the event of oil spills. The National Audit Office is of the view that this gives cause for concern about preparedness to deal with oil.

Government support is not reaching its target

The SRSA has not fed back enough experience to the municipalities. The follow-up work carried out by the SRSA after major oil spills has primarily covered the environmental aspects, and has not highlighted the problems and potential of various ways of organising and leading oil protection

measures.

The SRSA has found it difficult to reach the municipalities with its support. The seminars and training courses in oil protection arranged by the SRSA have not elicited much response from the municipalities. This means that the experience which the SRSA has tried to pass on in this way has only reached a limited number of municipalities.

The EPA has given the Swedish Environmental Research Institute (IVL) the task of maintaining an on-call oil advisory service. Knowledge of this on-

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call service is poorly disseminated in the municipalities however. More than half of the municipalities do not know that they can use it. The SRSA website has no clear information about the oil on-call service.

The public agencies have no control of the decontamination phase

The biggest job for the municipalities after oil accidents is usually decontamination. An important aspect of decontamination is managing oil waste such as oil-contaminated sand. Most coastal municipalities have not prepared for this by producing plans for how the oil waste is to be managed. There are stringent requirements for how oil waste is to be managed because it is regarded as hazardous waste. The SRSA, EPA and other agencies involved have previously drawn attention to the fact that waste management risks becoming a bottleneck in the event of a major accident.

The decontamination phase of a rescue operation is unregulated. Sweden differs from a number of other countries in this respect. One consequence is that the SRSA and the County Administrative Boards, in their supervision reports, are unable to bring up shortcomings in the municipalities' planning for the decontamination phase. This includes the municipalities' preparedness for dealing with oil waste.

Another consequence is that the County Administrative Boards' ability to take over responsibility for preventing oil damage in the event of major oil spills does not cover the decontamination phase. The current body of regulation says nothing about who is responsible for prioritising between municipalities regarding where decontamination resources are to be applied.

Lack of clarity about oil protection stores

The SRSA is responsible for maintaining and developing the regional oil protection stores. These stores are to supplement the resources of the municipalities. The SRSA has not been sufficiently clear about whether

the stores are primarily intended to provide municipalities with equipment for oil protection work or if the task also includes providing staff to function as experts.

Recurring exercises for staff are an important condition for achieving and maintaining the ability to carry out successful measures in the event of accidents. It is doubtful whether the oil protection stores have carried out exercises to the necessary extent and with the necessary content and realism.

It is furthermore unclear whether the oil protection stores have the material capacity required to deal with the consequences of major oil

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accidents and live up to the Government's requirements for protection from oil damage.

Supervision does not meet requirements

The supervision so far carried out by the SRSA and the County Administrative Boards to check whether municipalities are complying with the Civil Protection Act has so far been limited in scope. The supervisory work has primarily been focused on helping municipalities and County Administrative Boards comply with the law.

The EPA's responsibility is unclear

The SRSA is tasked with providing support to municipalities to maintain properly functioning protection from oil damage. The EPA has an agreement with the IVL on expert support in the event of oil accidents. It is however unclear how far the Agency's responsibility goes, e.g. in the issue of providing expert support in oil spills.

Recommendations

The government should:

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Consider the possibility of extending the supervisory responsibility of the SRSA and the County Administrative Boards to also include the decontamination phase.

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Consider the possibility of extending the mandate of the County Administrative Boards to take over responsibility for combating oil in the event of major oil spills to include the decontamination phase.

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Clarify the EPA's responsibility for protection from oil damage.

The SRSA and the County Administrative Boards should:

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Draw the attention of municipalities to the need to plan for large oil spills. For example, the Rescue Services Agency and the County Administrative Boards should examine, as part of their supervision, whether preparedness for oil spills is equivalent to the risks the municipality has highlighted and documented in its action plan(s).

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The SRSA should:

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Find a strategic balance between equipment and expert knowledge in the support offered by the Agency to the municipalities with the object of meeting Government requirements for protection against oil damage. In this context, the SRSA should consider whether the exercises carried out to manage oil spills are of sufficient quality.

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The SRSA should also consider improving feedback of experience from work carried out during and after oil spills.

The EPA and the SRSA should:

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Ensure that information reaches the municipalities concerning the support available from the IVL on-call oil advisory service.

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