

Environmentalists worried about fallout from incident

Boucherville Islands are not in danger, Montreal Port authority says

BY CHERYL CORNACCHIA, THE GAZETTE SEPTEMBER 30, 2010

Even though government officials insisted yesterday that Tuesday night's oil spill at the Suncor refinery does not threaten wildlife or the fragile ecosystem of Boucherville Islands, environmentalists remained unconvinced that all is well in the St. Lawrence River.

The big worry for many hinged on the fact that the diesel product that spilled into the St. Lawrence from the former Petro-Canada refinery in the East End, now operated by Suncor, has not yet been identified.

By the end of yesterday's first full day of cleanup conducted by Simec, the private agency approved by Transport Canada to carry out such work, officials on-site admitted they were unsure exactly what leaked from Suncor's refinery.

As a result, environmental concerns remained heightened even after Environment Canada wildlife biologists reported they could see no migratory birds covered in oil when they conducted helicopter inspections of the St. Lawrence from the site to Contrecoeur.

"There are too many unanswered questions," said Sylvie Bibeau, a toxicologist and biologist with Montreal's Comite Zip environmental group. The committee is dedicated to the restoration and protection of the St. Lawrence River.

If the diesel product that leaked at the port terminal contained heavier hydrocarbon molecules that could contaminate the river bed, Bibeau said, fish will be affected as well as migratory birds that feed on fish.

There is some concern about the oil that has leaked, said Frederic Gauthier, the senior emergency officer for Environment Canada on-site. At this point, he said, it could only be described as a "mix of hydrocarbons."

However, Gauthier said: "The majority of the product is confined to the dock and contained by the booms."

As a proactive measure, Gauthier added, Suncor installed additional booms yesterday to protect Vercheres after a computer model suggested the South Shore community could be affected if some diesel escaped the booms and wind and currents acted as they usually do.

However, "the Boucherville Islands are not in danger," added Yves Gilson, a spokesperson for the Montreal Port Authority.

Although the Port Authority, Environment Canada and Quebec's environment department are overseeing various aspects of the cleanup and ensuring that the environment is protected, Gilson said, Suncor is responsible for the actual work.

"It's like British Petroleum this summer,' Gilson said. "They (Suncor) made the pollution and they are the ones to clean it up."

Cameron Fenton is an ecoactivist with Climate Justice Montreal, a grassroots environmental group opposed to development of Quebec's shale gas reserves and the proposed use of the Suncor refinery for the storage of bitumen from Alberta's oilsands.

"After this summer's oil industry accidents," he said, (these) oil spills should set off warning bells.

"Water where we are flows downstream and the provincial government has put a moratorium on further offshore drilling in the St. Lawrence estuary."

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Video About The Spill And The Cleanup

To see a video by Pierre Obendrauf about the incident, go to: montrealgazette.com/videos

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