

Plenty of questions surround oil spill in St. Lawrence River near Montreal East

BY MAX HARROLD, THE GAZETTE SEPTEMBER 29, 2010



A worker pumps diesel fuel from the Montreal East waterfront after a fuel spill Tuesday evening in Pointe Aux Trembles.

Photograph by: Robert J. Galbraith, The Gazette

This story has been updated. [Click here](#) to view our gallery for more photos from the scene.

MONTREAL – Many questions about Tuesday night's oil spill into the St. Lawrence River have yet to be answered.

Little is known about the exact cause or source of the spill – which by Wednesday morning coated a portion of the shoreline in east-end Montreal with a stinky molasses-coloured soup – or the chain of events following calls by residents to the fire department on Tuesday night.

By 8:30 a.m. Wednesday, booms to contain the spill were in place, and enclosed two inlets on both sides of the Suncor Energy facility at Marien Ave. and Notre Dame St. Workers were adjusting and installing more booms throughout the morning.

At a news conference Wednesday afternoon, Suncor's Montreal refinery vice-president Bruno Francoeur said that of the 35 barrels of diesel that leaked out of its refinery conduit, 30 barrels' worth had been recovered. By Wednesday afternoon, he said, suction pipes had vacuumed up all but five barrels, or 500 litres, of the light fuel that floated on the water's surface.

He said that the floating booms were installed at 2:30 a.m. Wednesday around the Pointe aux Trembles loading dock. As a precautionary measure, Francoeur said, two booms had been placed down river close to Verchères and Contrecoeur after an Environmental surveyor noticed a sheen on the water.

The oil company executive stressed that by the time citizens smelled the diesel and called the fire department at around 9 p.m. on Tuesday night, Suncor was already aware of the problem.

All four conduits that carry diesel used to flush out the pipes after a loading were shut down for testing to find the one that had the breach, Francoeur said.

The response to the leak is troubling, said Maurice Vanier, a former mayor of Pointe aux Trembles who is on the Comité mixte municipalités/industries/citoyens de l'est de Montréal, a liaison group with 30 government, industrial and citizen members including oil companies – Suncor among them – and Environment Canada and the Montreal Department of Public Health.

"I don't understand the confusion," said Vanier. "I smelled bunker oil from my house a kilometre from the facility at 5 p.m. I'm sure of it."

And what is puzzling, Vanier said, is that Suncor has been a good partner with local community groups, staging a simulated leak at its east-end refinery in June to practice its response measures. It is also planning another simulation in November at the facility on Marien, he said.

The response to the leak shows that "we haven't succeeded yet in having good communications between the emergency responders, the company and the different levels of government. We still have work to do," he said.

Sylvie Bibeau, a toxicologist and biologist who is director of the Comité Zip Jacques Cartier, an environmental group that advocates for the St. Lawrence River, noted that the same facility has had problems before. On Dec. 29, 2008, 240,000 litres of heavy fuel oil leaked into the ground. "It took months to get answers on that one," she said.

"We are in the dark about some very important things," she added. "What is in that leak besides diesel? What was the pathway of the leak (based on the water currents and winds at the time)? We have migratory birds in the area. How will this affect them? What about the people? Residents go down to shoreline all the time. There are private docks in the area; how will those boats be affected?"

There are people who live here who need answers.”

Miroslav Misura, a 44-year-old construction worker who lives a few blocks from the Marien facility, said the smell Tuesday night “was extremely strong. I felt that it must be at least a little dangerous.”

He walked through the tall reeds and over the rocky beach to the shoreline to look at workers with breathing masks vacuuming the muck.

Misura has worked at the facility, building a staircase and cleaning an oil tank, he added. “There are weak points in all workplaces. But this is really important. You know even one drop of oil ruins a glass of water.”

Suncor maintains it responded promptly. “We put our emergency plan into action with the participation of Environment Canada and the Environment Department of Quebec. All protocols for incidence response were followed,” Francoeur said. “We took measures right away to make sure the air was safe for citizens or we would have evacuated.”

The spill was contained mostly to the west of the loading dock next to René Labrosse park, he said, and a crew was out on the water Wednesday with power hoses to corral the slick and move it towards six pump trucks that were sucking up the spill.

“We expect the recovery till be finished by Thursday,” Francoeur said. “The booms will stay in place as long as necessary. The environmental damage, if any, will be determined by Environment Canada.”

ANNE SUTHERLAND OF THE GAZETTE CONTRIBUTED TO THIS REPORT

mharrold@montrealgazette.com

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)



A worker pumps diesel fuel from the Montreal East waterfront after a fuel spill Tuesday evening in Pointe Aux Trembles.

Photograph by: Robert J. Galbraith, The Gazette



