

Second spill in matter of weeks raises questions: MUN prof

By Daniel MacEachern

An environmentalist and Memorial University professor says the second recent spill from a rig operated by Husky Energy raises questions about regulation of the provincial oil industry.

The Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Offshore Petroleum Board (CNLOPB) announced Thursday afternoon that Husky reported a spill of about 600 litres of drilling fluid from its GSF Grand Banks rig early Thursday morning.

A Husky spokeswoman said the oil is very low in toxicity and sank to the bottom. But Bill Montevecchi, a MUN research professor in psychology, biology and ocean sciences, said the second spill in a matter of weeks "about 5,000 litres was spilled by the same rig, owned by Transocean, in September" prompts troubling questions about oil industry regulation.

There was also a spill of 4,000 litres earlier this year, but that one was confined to the rig's deck.

Obviously there's a problem," said Montevecchi, who noted that incidents like this rely on self-reporting by the companies involved, and it can sometimes be difficult to get a truly accurate assessment.

Husky says at 3 a.m. that 600 litres of drilling fluid went over the side. Well, that wasn't measured in litre cups or anything like that - those are calculations that are based on flow, time, the diameter of pipe that it's coming out of, there's all kinds of considerations.â€

The time of the day and the fact that the oil quickly sank are also factors, he said.

We just really should not be naive about what's happening. We don't have to assume there's lying on the part of Husky or that they're fabricating or that they're exaggerating," he said.

But what we do have to acknowledge is that there's no independent assessment of that. Husky says there were 600 litres spilled.

Immediately the CNLOPB says there were 600 litres spilled. Well, they weren't there. Essentially, they just give press releases from what the oil companies tell them, and that's not regulation. I don't know what that is, but it's not environmental protection that we need and it's not regulation."

Montevecchi said there are no independent observers to determine what effect the oil might have on ocean wildlife, either.

"If you want an analogy, it would be like if DFO wanted to know if a Portuguese fishing captain was overfishing on the tail of the Grand Bank (and) they ask that fishing skipper to send in a report of his mesh size and how big his fish are. And he might not be doing anything illegal, but the fact of the matter is, to take that simple analogy, we know that's inappropriate, we would never act that way with a fishing regulation, so why do we act that way because it's oil?"

A request for comment from a CNLOPB spokesman on reporting regulations left Friday afternoon was not returned by deadline.