Prevention of Marine Spills (SOPEP) — study guide

A spill is never planned for — which is exactly why the plan exists. SOPEP is the shipboard plan that turns a spill response from panic into procedure. This guide covers the requirement, the first actions and the report.[1]

What SOPEP is and who needs it

A **Shipboard Oil Pollution Emergency Plan (SOPEP)** is required by MARPOL for all oil tankers of 150 gross tonnage and above, and all ships of 400 gross tonnage and above. **MARPOL** is the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships. The primary purpose of a SOPEP is to allow robust, effective and tested spill-response procedures to be implemented quickly when the need arises.

Minimising the risk

All crew should carry out a spill assessment as part of every pre-job risk assessment, check tank, vessel or container capacity before beginning any bunkering operations, know where the nearest spill kit is, and undertake regular inspections of high-risk spill points. Accidental discharges of oil or chemicals arise from equipment failure, overfilling of tanks, and human error.

First actions in a spill

The first action in the event of a spill is to **alert all crew members**. In the event of an actual discharge of oil, the Master should begin mitigation measures *before* contacting the nearest coastal state. Note that not only actual spills must be reported — potential spills are reportable too. Priority must always be given to the safety of the personnel on board. The Vessel Master has overall responsibility for all the steps required in the SOPEP process.

Controlled actions

In a spill, the crew should consider ballasting or de-ballasting, internal cargo transfer operations, carrying out an initial risk assessment, and implementing priority spill countermeasures. Navigational actions to consider include possible ship-to-ship cargo transfers, the weather, tide and swell forecast, and altering the vessel's course, position and/or speed. If a leak occurs from a pipeline, stop using the connection immediately, isolate any defective pipe sections, and drain affected sections down to an available slack tank.

The notification report

The initial SOPEP notification report should include the ship's name, call sign and flag; the date and time of the event; ship size and type; and the number of crew on board. Further notification information must detail any relevant cargo, ballast or bunker dispositions, the characteristics of the spilled oil, and any noticeable slick movement.

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The IMO maintains an up-to-date **Focal Points List** of the national agencies responsible for receiving and processing SOPEP reports. If a spill occurs in port, reporting without delay matters because prompt liaison with local agencies helps mitigate potential damage.

Impact and context

The environmental impact of an oil spill is influenced by weather conditions and the quantity and properties of the oil spilled. Incidents that pose an injury risk to personnel include fire or explosion, ship collision, hazardous vapour release, and excessive listing. A spill that resulted in an estimated 5 million barrels of crude oil leaking into the Gulf of Mexico was **Deepwater Horizon / Macondo**.

Key facts to remember

- SOPEP: oil tankers ≥150 GT and ships ≥400 GT (MARPOL). Purpose: implement tested response procedures quickly.
- Spill risk reduction: pre-job spill assessment, check capacity before bunkering, know the spill kit, inspect high-risk points.
- First action: alert all crew. Master has overall SOPEP responsibility. Personnel safety is the priority.
- Report potential as well as actual spills; Master begins mitigation before contacting the coastal state.
- Pipeline leak: stop use, isolate defective sections, drain to a slack tank.
- Notification: ship name/call sign/flag, date/time, size/type, crew number, cargo dispositions, oil characteristics, slick movement. IMO Focal Points List.
- Deepwater Horizon/Macondo: ~5 million barrels.

Sources

1. IMO MARPOL Annex I — Regulations for the Prevention of Pollution by Oil (Regulation 37: Shipboard Oil Pollution Emergency Plan and reporting requirements).