

# Alaska Dispatch News

## Citizen watchdog group hammers state for not responding to Cook Inlet oil leak

January 23, 2017

Alex DeMarban

The citizen watchdog group for Cook Inlet is blasting state regulators for not responding to a diesel fuel leak inside a gas production platform discovered by Hilcorp Alaska shortly after it acquired it from ConocoPhillips in late October.

Officials with Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council say that the leak, discovered Nov. 19 and initially [reported](#) as 69,000 gallons but later revised down to 21,000 gallons, should have prompted the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation to quickly send an investigator to the scene.

The lack of such a response raises doubts about the state's preparation for an oil spill in the region, the group said in its [January newsletter](#).

"What we thought of as less than a robust response to this incident is a big concern," said Lynda Giguere, the group's public outreach director.

The leak was discovered in one the platform's four hollow support legs.

ADEC sent an investigator to the platform, but not until Dec. 15, nearly a month after the fuel was discovered. It was also well after the fluid had been pumped out.

The agency has maintained that no fuel leaked into the Inlet, so it did not have jurisdiction over the incident. The agency also said the gas production platform is not subject to its oil-pollution prevention requirements. Platform operations are supported by fuel contained in a 5,000-gallon tank, too small [under state law](#) to require Hilcorp to submit a discharge prevention and contingency plan to the agency.

CIRCAC counters that fuel could have entered the Inlet from the support leg, providing a reason for ADEC to respond. ADEC calls that risk "remote."

The U.S. Coast Guard sent personnel to the platform to oversee the removal of the diesel fuel from the leg, a weeklong process that began Nov. 29, 10 days after the Coast Guard received a report of the leak.

Hilcorp said the fuel leaked from a "faulty pipe" and was "trapped" in one of the four legs, according to a report taken on Nov. 27 by the U.S. Coast Guard's [National Response Center](#). The fuel did not enter the Inlet, Hilcorp told the Coast Guard.

The [platform](#) legs are like huge pipes, 14 feet in diameter and about 140 feet tall. They support the production platform rising 40 feet from the water. They can also provide a conduit for drilling operations into the seafloor.

Hilcorp and Coast Guard personnel saw no sheen on the water, said Coast Guard Petty Officer 1<sup>st</sup> Class Bill Colclough. Also, the Coast Guard received no reports of spilled fuel from communities or the industry and has completed its investigation.

"There is always a possibility that fuel could have discharged into the water, but in this case it did not," he said.

The platform, about 40 miles southwest of Anchorage, was built in 1968. It's one of many aging facilities in Cook Inlet, the dominant oil-and-gas basin in Alaska before explorers discovered the massive Prudhoe Bay field, also in 1968.

The report does not say when the diesel fuel may have begun leaking.

Hilcorp did not return several requests for an interview. Lori Nelson, Hilcorp Alaska's external affairs manager, [told the Petroleum News](#) in December that the condition associated with the leak "existed prior to Hilcorp taking over operation of the platform."

But Amy Burnett, a communications official at ConocoPhillips, said on Friday that she understands the leak occurred after the sale of the platform on Oct. 31. "ConocoPhillips did not detect a depletion of the diesel storage volumes prior to transfer of operations to Hilcorp," she said.

[CIRCAC](#), created by Congress after the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill led to increased oversight in Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet, asserts that a spill into the inlet was possible.

The diesel sat atop a column of about 35 feet of seawater, CIRCAC said. The fluids inside the leg are "tidally influenced."

"If water is rising and falling with tidal action, there's communication" between water in the inlet and what's inside the support leg, said Steve "Vinnie" Catalano, operations director for CIRCAC.

That means fuel could have found its way into the Inlet, he said.

ADEC called that possibility "extremely low" because the openings in the leg are very low, well below the area where the diesel fuel sat atop water. Diesel fuel is lighter than water and floats.

"DEC feels in this case the risk of diesel entering Cook Inlet is remote," said a statement emailed by Candice Bressler, a public information officer.

The agency did not initially send an investigator in part because the little information the agency could learn — access to the platform leg was extremely limited — was overshadowed by the risk of conducting an inspection while operations were underway on the rig, she said. Hilcorp and the Coast Guard also provided very good information from the field.

CIRCAC officials said that even if the possibility of a spill into Cook Inlet did not exist, the agency should have quickly sent an investigator.

"Our contention is because the diesel left its primary containment and ended up in the leg, that's a spill. The state sees it differently," said Catalano.

Getting second-hand reports from the company and Coast Guard is not sufficient, even if the state shares some of the same concerns with the agency, said CIRCAC's Giguere. Many facts weren't known in the beginning, but an active regulatory presence is key for determining the right risk and response.

"Relying on any federal agency to look after the concerns and best interests of Alaska is not good enough," Giguere said.