

Shell under fire over 'toxic waste risk'

Julia Horton

Dozens of huge concrete tanks containing unknown amounts of toxic petrochemical waste will be left on the seabed under the latest proposals for decommissioning some of the oldest and largest oil rigs around Scotland's coast.

The energy giant Shell plans to apply early next year for permission to leave 64 underwater storage tanks in the Brent oilfield, 116 miles off Shetland. Each is about 60 metres in height, roughly the same as Edinburgh's Scott Monument and taller than Nelson's column in London.

The firm said that while ongoing research suggested that contaminated sediment might be found at the bottom of 42 of the tanks once they were drained of any remaining oil, studies also showed that abandoning them would not pose a "significant" environmental threat.

It warned that the risk of polluting the seas would be greater if it attempted to move the tanks and their contents onshore because the four ageing 1970s rigs were never designed to be dismantled and current technology was not capable of removing them safely.

Environmentalists warned energy giants not to put the world's oceans at risk by failing to invest an adequate share of their multibillion-pound profits in developing better ways to clear up oil fields that have been pumped dry.

Lang Banks, director of WWF Scotland, said: "For decades the industry pushed the boundaries of engineering and science to the limits to extract the valuable oil and gas. They should therefore be expected to push those limits once again to deal with their potentially hazardous legacy. The marine environment should not be put at risk by allowing corners to be cut."

Calum Duncan, Scotland programme manager for the Marine Conservation Society, voiced "disappointment" but recognised the technical challenges and supported Shell's plan provided that "substantial" waste around the rigs was also removed.

He said: "If [new] technical solutions can be found, we would welcome sediment from the [tanks] being removed in future."

Under an international convention known as OSPAR, the UK oil and gas industry must remove all structures during decommissioning including the "topsides" — the rigging above the water. Exceptions are only possible if there are technical limitations. In such cases companies must apply to the UK government's Department of Energy and Climate Change for an exemption.

Shell has already announced that a purpose-built ship will "slice off" the four Brent rig topsides as major decommissioning work gets under way later this decade.

After debating decommissioning options with experts since 2006, Shell is now considering three options for the storage tanks — leaving any sediment inside untouched, "capping" the tanks to make them safer or taking any sediment ashore for treatment and disposal.

A spokeswoman said: "There would be no significant environmental benefits to be gained by seeking to remove the whole structures from their present locations in order to dismantle and recycle them onshore."

"Indeed, the resulting environmental risks and impacts from re-float, tow, in-shore dismantling and onshore disposal and recycling would be high compared to leaving the [tanks] in situ."

Meanwhile the Scottish Wildlife Trust said that while rigs should be removed completely wherever possible, a

Underwater tanks



"case by case" approach might be better because decommissioning could have both a negative and positive environmental impact, with some structures acting as artificial reefs, for example.

Jonathan Hughes, the trust's director of conservation, said: "A more pragmatic approach where operators partially remove structures could be a more sensible one for the marine environment in some cases."

Energy firms should pay savings made in the multibillion-pound decommissioning costs into a compensation fund to restore habitat damaged by oil and gas exploitation, it was claimed.

Even one drink is too many for most drivers

Philip Pank Transport Correspondent

Hostility towards drink-driving has hardened in the past decade, but one in three drivers continues to get behind the wheel after consuming alcohol.

Most drivers, 69 per cent, said they did not drive after drinking alcohol, compared with 49 per cent ten years ago, a survey found. However, one in ten motorists said that they drove after drinking enough to push them over the limit, and 32 per cent said that they drove after consuming some alcohol or the morning after drinking to excess.

Road safety campaigners are urging ministers to lower the drink-drive limit to reduce the number of accidents involving drivers who have been drinking. The number of people killed in drink-drive accidents rose by 17 per cent last year, according to provisional data.

Julie Townsend, deputy chief executive of Brake, the road safety charity, said: "Attitudes towards drink-driving have shifted dramatically, yet people are still being killed by those who continue to take this inexcusable risk."

"We need action from the Government to put a stop to the carnage. Our current drink-drive limit is a dangerous relic. Research has shown a lower limit is far safer, and almost all other countries in Europe have reduced theirs."

Brake wants a reduction in the legal blood-alcohol level to 20mg per 100ml of blood from the current 80mg.

More drivers fail drink-drive tests at 11pm and in the hour after midnight than during any other specific hours of

the day, but there is another worrying trend — more people fail breath tests from 6am to 1pm combined than in the two peak hours. Last year, 642 people failed between 6am and 1pm every week, compared with 627 from 11pm to 1am.

The AA is highlighting the risk of driving the morning after having a drink. It says it takes an hour for each unit of alcohol to leave the bloodstream, depending on size, gender, diet, metabolism and mood.

"Too many drivers are caught over the limit the morning after the night before. We don't want the morning after to end in mourning disasters so advise drivers to think carefully before driving after a night out," said Edmund King, AA president.

Researchers at the University of the West of England in Bristol found that impairment caused by a hangover can be just as severe as being under the influence of alcohol. Drivers subjected to simulated driving the morning after a heavy drinking session had slower reactions and made more mistakes than those who were sober.

Last year, 280 people died in drink-drive collisions, 16 per cent of all road deaths, while 55,300 people were convicted of drink or drug-driving in England and Wales. One in three killed or seriously hurt was aged between 16 and 24 and eight out of ten were male.

"There appears to be a core of younger drivers taking greater chances and perhaps the message has not got through to them," Mr King said.

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