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Québec Region

Région du Québec

Fact Sheet

The Emergency Response Team From One Environmental Emergency to Another

The majestic St. Lawrence had lost some of its sparkle for the residents of Tracy on June 4, 1990, when they discovered more than a ton of heavy oil fouling the river bank. Concerned, and well aware of the environmental impact of such a spill, they promptly contacted Environment Canada.

As soon as the alert was received, the emergency response team sprang into action to bring the situation under control. The black oil from an unknown source had spread some 300 metres before being discovered. Fortunately, it had been caught by branches and rocks along the shore and stopped moving, so that the emergency response team was able to rapidly co-ordinate clean-up of the river bank.

Emergency Response Team Kept Busy

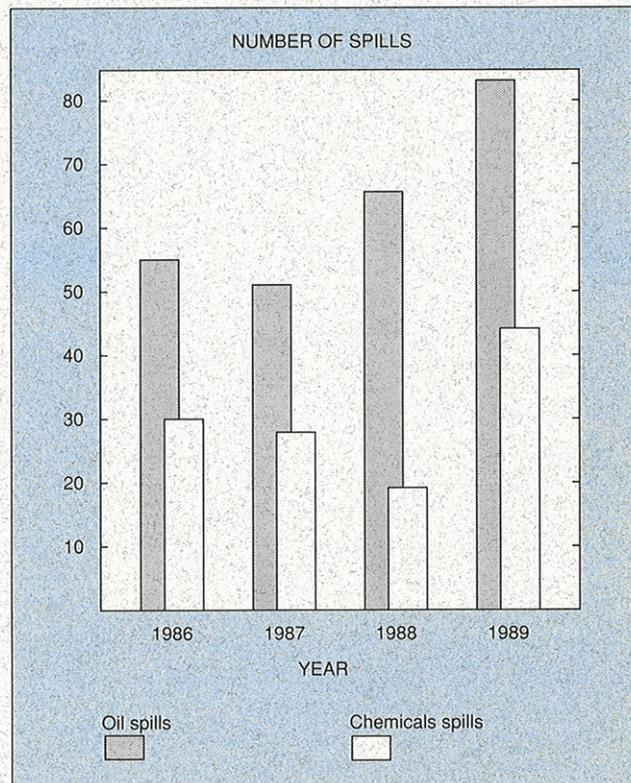
Hundreds of spills occur each year in Québec. Of the total number of environmental incidents reported to the federal government in 1989-90, oil spills represented 64%, chemical spills represented

Photo : Environmental Protection Branch



Booms must be installed rapidly at the site to contain the spill.

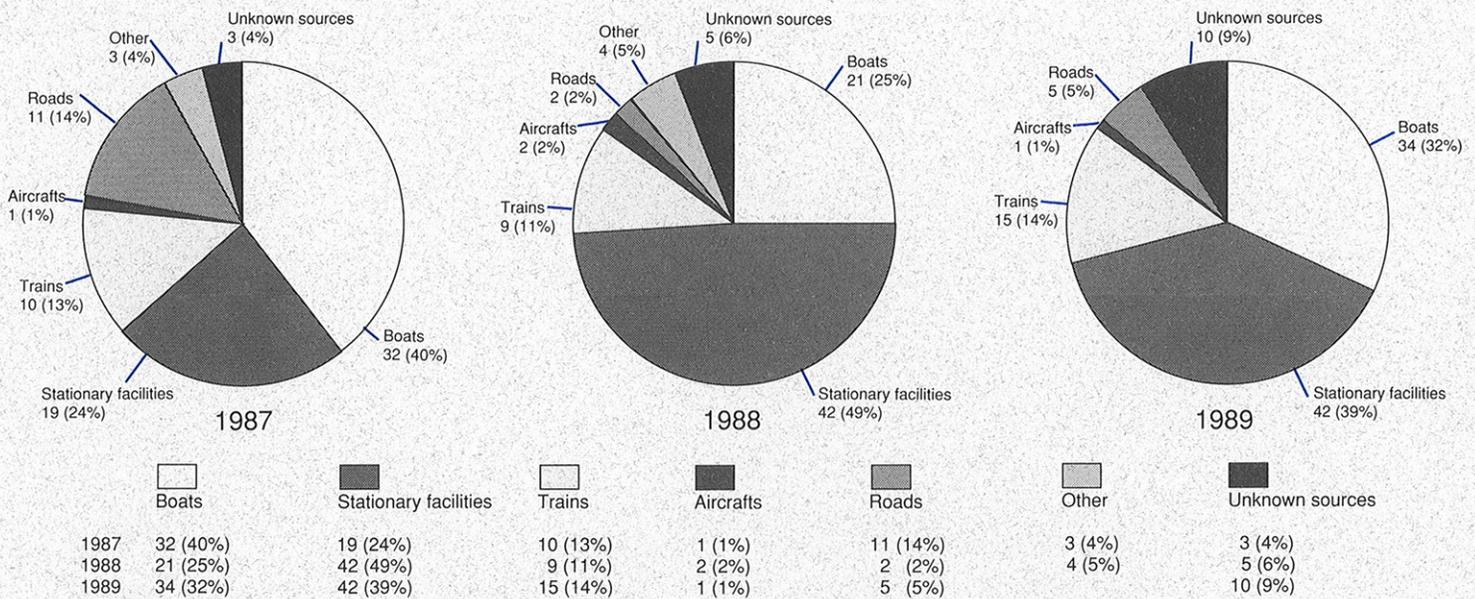
Number and type of environmental emergencies in Québec reported to the emergency response team in which Environment Canada took part.



Over the years, an increase has been noted in the number of environmental emergencies reported. This is due to greater public awareness of environmental issues.

34%, and the rest consisted of a combination of the two. That same year, the emergency service in Québec Region answered more than 1,500 telephone calls and took part in 142 pollution response operations.

Environmental emergencies by emission since 1987



Environmental Emergencies Under Federal Jurisdiction

Role of Environment Canada in Emergencies

Assumes lead responsibility in spills:

- affecting federal facilities;
- from unknown maritime sources;
- in interprovincial waters;
- when the agencies concerned request help from Environment Canada or when no other agency takes charge.

Role of Emergency Response Team

- to ensure effective response to spills;
- to co-ordinate departmental operations;
- to provide advice on environmental impact, contaminants and clean-up;
- to assume operational responsibility for environmental emergencies under federal jurisdiction;
- to provide information on proximity of wildlife habitats, risk to wildlife, hydrology, groundwater and toxicology in the aquatic environment;
- to operate detection and analytical instruments to determine the concentration of contaminants;
- to provide information to the public and the media;
- to disseminate weather forecasts and warnings through the Atmospheric Environment Service to help the different agencies determine action to be taken and keep the public informed.

The environmental emergency response team's activities are not limited to spills. Environment Canada's involvement as a support agency extends well beyond the framework of environmental emergencies in which it assumes lead responsibility. In most emergencies, the Environmental Protection Branch acts as a support agency, intervening at the request of a province, territory or municipality. It also advises the Canadian Coast Guard and Ports Canada. In addition, it acts as the lead agency in incidents where the pollution is from an unknown source in maritime environments or affects federal facilities and also in any environmental emergency where no other agency takes charge.

The Government of Canada is concerned with spills affecting fisheries, migratory birds and all other forms of marine life in interprovincial or international boundary waters, as well as spills on federal property, at federal facilities and off Canada's maritime coasts. In such cases, the Environmental Protection Branch takes charge of operations and pays the costs if the pollution is from an unknown source.

Emergency Response Team Action

Major emergencies require not only the work of response personnel but also the participation of the majority of Environment Canada's Protection and Conservation staff. Once the emergency response team arrives at the site, it uses the best technology available to gather essential scientific data and makes the information available to the different agencies involved. It co-ordinates the work of the teams taking samples and conducting analyses. Using mobile detection and analysis equipment, the emergency response team determines the extent and scope of contamination.

It also provides advice on hydrology and toxicology in aquatic environments, as well as information on habitats at risk, contaminant behaviour and clean-up techniques. The team can also provide advice and expert assistance in planning remedial action. The team also helps train emergency personnel in fire departments and industry, and keeps up to date on state-of-the-art technologies for controlling spills or restoring sites.

Photo : Environmental Protection Branch



The St Amable fire: Environment Canada's mobile response unit arrives at the scene within the first few hours.

Material Resources

To ensure effective response in environmental emergencies, the team maintains a regional coordination centre equipped with telecommunications equipment, two mobile units (one of which is equipped with measuring, sampling and communications equipment) and a mobile weather station with a telescopic antenna for gathering information on the spread of spilled substances.

Effectiveness Through Better Communication

The effectiveness of the communications networks is a key factor for maintaining good contact with response agencies, the media and the public, thereby ensuring more accurate reporting of information. Thanks to this information network, the emergency response team can monitor and report on all emergencies which have a significant impact on the environment. The emergency service operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Responsibility for Clean-up

In each case of pollution, the «polluter pays» principle applies. Polluters must clean up spills for which they are responsible, under the supervision of a government agency. However, the emergency response team keeps a close watch on the clean-up, directing the work and constantly monitoring the situation. When the pollution comes from an unknown source, the emergency response team entrusts responsibility for decontamination and clean-up to private firms, in accordance with its specifications, and pays the costs.

The number of requests for emergency services is growing as the public becomes increasingly aware of how vulnerable the environment is. The significant losses due to environmental emergencies and the high cost of restoring sites make us understand the scope of environmental problems caused by environmental emergencies. Cleaning up and recovering pollutants means hiring many workers and buying specialized equipment. A major spill can cost millions of dollars.

The emergency response team is responsible for ensuring public safety and the environmental quality of ecosystems. The effectiveness of the emergency service and growing public awareness help to protect the environment and quality of life in Québec.

**In case of emergency, 24 hours a day
(514) 283-2333**

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