

ABSTRACT

Over the past 20 years, governments and industry have expended considerable effort to improve spill preparedness and response. This paper reviews where improvements have occurred, which elements have been most or least effective, and where future investment should concentrate.

There are a wide variety of approaches to spill response. There is no universal solution to an oil spill, and all available strategies may be required. Despite its proven effectiveness, dispersant use often is discouraged, possibly because of a persistent myth that it will cause lasting environmental damage. Responders, therefore, often are denied use of what could be the most effective tool in the right circumstances.

Other myths persist — for example, the purchase of more equipment is the solution. The reality is that, without proper planning and support, addi-

tional equipment solves nothing. Future efforts must concentrate on strengthening spill infrastructure. Another myth is that mobilising every available resource leads to better response. The reality is that, by selecting appropriate techniques and resources, together with strict cost control, successful response can be conducted at a sensible cost.

Politicians, the media, environmental interest groups, and the public must be educated that, despite response improvements, oil almost always will come ashore. In most cases, however, the environment will not be permanently damaged. Unless public expectations can be reduced to accept this, investment will never be perceived as a success.

It is concluded that, in some places, response capabilities have improved. Unfortunately, in many other places, they have not: too many myths remain, and too few realities are understood.