

Case Study

The Environmental Conflict Surrounding the Decommissioning of Brent Spar

Background

Brent Spar (BS) or Brent E, was a North Sea oil storage and tanker loading buoy in the Brent oilfield, operated by Shell UK. With the completion of a pipeline connection to Shetland, the storage facility was considered to be of no further value as of 1991. It was jointly owned by Shell and ESSO, but operated by Shell who took responsibility for decommissioning it. The Brent Spar was 147 m high and 29 m in diameter, and displaced 66,000 tonnes.

The Facts

Shell UK took over 3 years to evaluate disposal options; it complied with national and international regulations, holding consultations with 'representative' environmental and fishing organisations in the UK. Careful analysis and planning went into developing (as required by UK law) the Best Practicable Environmental Option (BPEO), which resulted in scientists and specialists agreeing that disposing of the Brent Spar in the deep ocean would have negligible environmental effects and would thus be the BPEO.

The site selected 'North Feni Ridge' was within UK waters and the UK Government issued a licence for disposal.

The disposal operation was cleared through the Oslo and Paris Commissions (OSPAR) to secure international agreement.

The Battle of Brent Spar

Greenpeace organized a worldwide, high-profile media campaign against this plan; they boarded and occupied Brent Spar on 30th April 1995, claiming that 5,500 tons of oil were on BS, against the Shell's estimate of 50 tons. On 9 May, the German government issued a formal objection to the British government, with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl protesting to the British Prime Minister, John Major at a G7 conference.

Although oil production companies supported Shell's position, influential companies in the offshore construction sector stood to make money from onshore dismantling and consequently supported the Greenpeace point of view.

The Fallout

Shell was boycotted in Germany, and across much of Northern Europe, violence threatened against staff and one service station was riddled with bullets. On 20 June, Shell had decided that due to falling sales and a drop in share price, their position was no longer tenable, and withdrew their plan to sink the Brent Spar. The final cost of the Brent Spar operation to Shell was between £60M and £100M, when loss of sales were considered.

Greenpeace's own reputation also suffered during the campaign, when it had to acknowledge that its assessment of the oil remaining in Brent Spar's storage tanks had been grossly overestimated. The overestimation of the contents damaged the credibility of Greenpeace in their wider campaigns; they were criticised in an editorial column in the scientific journal 'Nature' for their lack of interest in facts.

Lessons Learnt

Shell admitted to have ‘unwittingly’ failed to communicate their plans sufficiently to the public and that they had severely underestimated strength of public opinion. It seemed to have failed to perceive that the environmental awareness in Europe has changed in recent years, and they failed to recognize that the issue was not only restricted to UK instead the impact would have reached all Europe. Consequently they did not expect to be in the worldwide media spotlight. Greenpeace also admitted to have made mistakes, as it allowed itself to follow the agenda set by others.

Conclusion

The Brent Spar platform was eventually dismantled, a large part of the base being reused in a harbour extension at Stavanger in Norway. While the Brent Spar was being dismantled, quantities of an endangered cold-water coral were found growing on the legs of the platform. Experts suggested leaving the legs of such platforms on sea bed in future but Greenpeace opposed this plan.

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References:

Case Study: Brent Spar, Fisheries Research Services, FRS Marine Laboratory, PO Box 101, 375 Victoria Road, Aberdeen. AB11 9DB UK

http://pixbox.co.uk/ct/downloads/Shervin_Setareh-Brent_Spar_Case_Study-1995-Questions.pdf