

Shell Uses Internet to Show Nigeria Oil Spill Data

JON GAMBRELL, Associated Press

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — Royal Dutch Shell PLC long has argued that thieves are to blame for most of the oil spills coming from pipelines in Nigeria's crude-producing southern delta. Now the company is trying to prove that claim in real time on the Internet.

Shell, the dominant oil company in Nigeria since production began there more than 50 years ago, has started posting photographs and reports on a website from every oil spill investigated by the company this year.

"Nobody else operating in the Niger Delta comes close to this level of transparency," Shell vice president Tony Attah said in a statement. "But regardless of how well we run our operations until sabotage and crude theft spills are stopped or curbed, the vast majority of oil spills will continue to blight large swathes of land and pollute rivers and farm lands."

While the majority of spills bear the telltale signs of thieves' hacksaw marks, it remains unlikely though this latest public relations move will help the image a company long demonized by environmentalists in Africa's most populous nation. Environmentalists here estimate over the last half century, enough oil has been spilled to equal one Exxon Valdez disaster per year.

Shell mentioned the website Wednesday in a statement warning that its Nigerian subsidiary faces an "unprecedented" level of oil thefts targeting its operation at Imo River, a field that spreads across Rivers and Abia states in the Niger Delta. The company shut its operation there in late August after a series of oil thefts caused oil spills, halting production at a field that produces just more than 1 million gallons of oil a day.

The company said a recent helicopter flight over the region saw thieves carting away the stolen crude in waiting river barges and trucks. Though production has stopped, the oil still can be taken from the pipelines there.

Also Wednesday, Shell announced it had lifted a production warning for its Forcados crude shipments after it shut down its Trans Forcados pipeline in early October following a "sabotage leak."

Shell pipelines and flow stations run across Nigeria's oil-rich delta region of swamps, mangroves and creeks, which is roughly the same size as South Carolina. Many areas remain remote, allowing thieves to tap into the lines to steal the easily refined crude oil produced here that makes Nigeria a top supplier to the U.S. Some of the oil is shipped out of the country, while others at crude refineries in the swamps cook it into diesel fuel.

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Experts and oil companies estimate thieves take hundreds of thousands of barrels a day from fields in Nigeria. A recent United Nations report on environmental damage in one part of the delta suggested there could be "collusion" between oil thieves and government officials to allow the thefts.

While unable to stop the theft, Shell launched its oil spill website to highlight what it says causes spills in the region. Reports on the website from January to Oct. 20 of this year show the company's pipelines spilled about 500,000 gallons of oil this year — of which just under a fifth came from operational errors or pipeline ruptures caused by Shell.

However, the largest spills — including a Feb. 9 spill and fire that saw 184,000 gallons of oil released — were caused by sabotage or theft, the Shell reports claim.

Each of the reports bear checklists showing them signed off by community leaders and Nigeria government officials, though Shell said it withholds the signatures and names of the officials out of security concerns.

The existence of the website came as a surprise to environmental activists, including Nnimmo Bassey, executive director of the Nigerian group Environmental Rights Action. However, Bassey cautioned that spill figures remained estimates, as Shell so far had refused to offer statistics on how much oil actually gets pumped out of its well sites.

This year's reports also don't take into account the damage done in the Niger Delta over 50 years of production, he said. Some environmentalists say as much as 550 million gallons of oil have poured into the delta during that period — at a rate roughly comparable to one Exxon Valdez disaster per year.

"The Niger Delta is a dead environment," Bassey said. "Telling us now they are not responsible, as of now or yesterday, is not the issue. The issue is the blame and guilt that has been established historically and they need to begin to clean up the mess."

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Online:

Royal Dutch Shell PLC's Nigeria spill website: <http://bit.ly/rqfnxi> [1]

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