



## Save The River

409 Riverside Drive, Clayton, NY 13624

Phone: 315-686-2010

www.savetheriver.org

# FACT SHEET

## The Devastating 1976 NEPCO 140 Oil Spill

In the foggy early morning hours of June 23, 1976, the tug *Eileen C*, pushing the *NEPCO 140* barge filled with crude oil, ran aground in the American Narrows off Wellesley Island in the heart of the St. Lawrence River's Thousand Islands region. Upon running aground, the barge ruptured two tanks and began leaking oil. Backing off the rock and resuming its upriver journey, the barge again ran aground four miles further upriver and ruptured another tank at Mason Point near Clayton, NY.

Ordered to anchor to prevent further ruptures, the barge leaked oil into the River for more than a day. Three hundred thousand gallons of thick crude oil leaked from the barge. The spill was carried over an 80-mile section of the St. Lawrence River by the river's swift current. As far downriver as Massena, New York and Brockville, Ontario, shoreline, marshes, wildlife, rocks, and boats were covered with oil. The spill was the worst inland oil spill in North American history and today remains the largest inland vessel oil spill in the United States.



In June 1976, the *NEPCO 140* barge ran aground and spilled more than 300,000 gallons of crude oil into the St. Lawrence River.

### Damage to the River Environment

The River's wildlife was caught at an especially vulnerable time. Fish were spawning in the shallows, birds were nesting or molting, and the complex ecosystems of the River's bays and



Several hundred waterfowl, ducks and other birds were harmed or killed by the spill.

marshes were coming alive after a long winter. However, at the time very little comprehensive information about the ecosystem and species populations existed, and sensitive habitat areas along the River had not been catalogued. As a result, it was difficult for clean-up officials to fully document the damage to the St. Lawrence River ecosystem. An attempt was made to determine the mortality of wildlife. A count of animal mortality included 226 waterfowl and ducks and 508 Birds mammals and amphibians.

### Cleanup Costs Millions

The cleanup and liability costs were estimated to be more than \$8 million, or approximately \$30 million in today's dollars. However, many costs are not accounted for including loss of tourism revenue to the region, damage to the River's environment, and lost ability to utilize the River for recreation during the time.

A large federal committee descended upon the community to coordinate the spill clean-up. The influx of people to clean up the oil and to handle financial claims created its own tensions, but in the end what resulted was total commitment by the local residents to restore the St. Lawrence River. Neighbors worked hand-in-hand with government employees, students and national volunteers for months. Clean-up of the oil was accomplished primarily by intensive hand labor through power washing shorelines and hand cutting and hauling contaminated underwater and marsh vegetation. The cleanup was terminated on October 22, 1976, 122 days after the spill. However, many areas with oil contamination were not cleaned up and the oil was left to degrade naturally.



A worker scoops oil towards a suction pipe. Much of the spill clean up was accomplished through hands on labor.

### Thirty Years Later

Fortunately, thirty years later the scars on the St. Lawrence River have faded and the River ecosystem has rebounded from the 1976 spill. However, the risk of another large spill on the River is ever present. Save The River firmly believes that spill prevention and preparedness are both critical in avoiding another devastating accident and spill.

Save The River supports current efforts to update and enhance spill response plans along the St. Lawrence Seaway. And as plans are developed, Save The River will work with River communities and state and federal agencies to ensure that the necessary resources are in place to minimize damage from spills on the River. While we are encouraged by the preparedness efforts, accident prevention is the only way to truly minimize damage from spills. To this end, Save The River is pursuing information on recent Seaway accidents in an effort to understand the root cause of the accidents and to ensure that the problems are eliminated or reduced.

*Save The River is a non-profit, member-based environmental organization whose mission is to preserve and protect the ecological integrity of the Thousand Islands Region of the St. Lawrence River through advocacy, education and research.*