

Controversy Over Caspian Seal Deaths

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A large number of seals have been found dead in Kazakhstan on the shores of the Caspian Sea, but while some are blaming the deaths on oil leaking from wells, others say the cause is an outbreak of distemper, accelerated by a warm winter.

On April 4, Kazakhstan's ministry for emergency situations found 127 dead Caspian seals along a dam that separates the sea from Kalamkas, an onshore oilfield.

An investigation into the animals' deaths is still going on and it is unclear why such a large number died at the same time, but ecologists say they either succumbed to disease or were overcome by water pollution levels.

Large amounts of crude oil in lake and sea water can suffocate animals and attack their immune system. The Caspian seal is unique to the region listed as vulnerable on the international "Red List" of endangered species.

Mels Eleusizov, head of the environmental movement Tabigat says the seals most likely died as a result of an oil spill from one of the wells in the area.

Eleusizov warned that the launch of commercial extraction at Kashagan, a major offshore field in Kazakh waters, in about three years' time could undermine efforts to maintain the sea's ecosystem as it is.

"These developments spell death for the Caspian," he said. "There may only be one borehole now, but several hundreds more are planned. It will be impossible to keep tabs on all of them," he said.

NBCentralAsia analyst Eduard Poletaev agrees that energy has taken precedence over environmental safety in the Caspian.

"It's very hard to say what the Caspian's future will be from an environmental point of view, because so much money and interest is at stake," he said. "When everything hinges on big money, ecology is left to one put aside. Nobody cares about seals given that the interests of several serious players are involved."

However, not everyone agrees that oil is the most likely culprit. Anatoly Gistsov, a senior scientist at Kazakhstan's Institute for Zoology, said no oil spills have been recorded in well-drilling area for a number of years.

He said seal deaths in the Kazakh part of the Caspian Sea are usually related to high winter temperatures that contribute to the rapid spread of the distemper virus.

Gistsov drew a parallel between this case and the large number of seals that died of distemper in the

Mangistau region in 2000. In that outbreak, 12,000 dead seals were found between April and September.

It was, he said, therefore highly unlikely that there was any link between exploratory drilling and the latest seal deaths in the region.

“The foreign companies are under strict supervision, and most of them use so-called non-waste technology, which means that all the by-products of drilling are disposed of on land and nothing is dumped in the sea,” he said.

(News Briefing Central Asia draws comment and analysis from a broad range of political observers across the region.)

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