Spanish Researchers Vent Anger Over Handling of Oil Spill

BARCELONA—Ever since the oil tanker Prestige sank in deep water off the Iberian coast on 19 November 2002, the Spanish government has been under fire for its handling of the accident. Now, scientists are adding their voices, en masse, to the din of protest. In a letter on page 511, 422 marine and atmospheric scientists accuse the government of largely ignoring the scientific community in the aftermath of the spill.

Of all the government's actions, most controversial is its decision to tow the stricken tanker away from shore and sink it rather than guide it into port (Science, 29 November, p. 1695). The government's early assurances that the sunken ship's remaining oil—an estimated 60,000 tons—would solidify in the cold depths have turned out to be spectacularly wrong. According to Spain's National Research Council, roughly 125 tons of oil per day have risen to the surface, apparently because it has cooled much more slowly than experts had anticipated, the council reports. Much of the oil has ended up polluting more than 900 kilometers of Spanish and French coastline, causing an estimated $1 billion in damages. By implying that its handling of the accident has been based on the advice of scientists, the government has tarnished their reputation, the letter's authors contend.

Outside experts concur that someone's reputation deserves being sullied. "It is difficult to imagine a worse course of action than the one taken. The location of the wreck is ideally situated to spread oil along the coasts," says oceanographer Desmond Barton of the United Kingdom's Plymouth Marine Laboratory. "I was amazed," adds Isabel Ambar, an oceanographer at the University of Lisbon, Portugal. "I could not believe that these decisions were taken based on scientific grounds."

Spain's science minister, economist Josep Piqué, acknowledged to Science that researchers were not consulted about the decision to sink the vessel. But he says that the government has engaged the scientific community ever since. "We did make contact with scientists 1 day after Prestige sank," says Piqué. He adds that the government has also established a commission to coordinate scientific efforts in managing the spill, evaluating the damage, and creating a science-based plan of action for future spills. Piqué defends his government's management of scientific input, calling it "an optimization of available resources."

Few scientists seem convinced. The government has worked harder at defending itself than managing the crisis, charges one of the letter's lead authors, marine ecologist Antonio Bode of the Spanish Institute of Oceanography in A Coruña. According to Bode, government scientists, including those at his institute, were told in a 15 December mass e-mail not to speak with the press about the Prestige. (He and many others defied the order in penning the letter to Science.) Bode also challenges Piqué's claim that a commission is coordinating a scientific response, noting that his team is studying the spill's effects without any input from Madrid. "The government has no awareness of its researchers," fumes Bode.

The scientists' demand for better dialog with their government "is a sensible one," says Barton. "What was obviously needed was planning prior to the incident and, one would hope, better preparation in the future."

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