

Pipe oozes oil in harbor

By HARRY EAGAR, Staff Writer

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KAHULUI – An unused pipeline under Pier 1 broke around sundown Tuesday and spilled an estimated 100 to 300 gallons of heavy fuel oil into Kahului Harbor.

The oil was corralled by booms, but the booms prevented the Pride of Hawaii cruise ship from docking Wednesday morning while the oil was being removed from the water.

“At first we thought it was molasses,” said Steve Pfister, Kahului harbor master.

Molasses was being pumped at the time, and no one was pumping petroleum from active lines. The two inactive pipelines, owned by Maui Electric Co., run under Pier 1 and were thought to have been cleaned and sealed years ago.

Pfister says he was never told that, but that was the understanding at the Harbors Division. MECO has been considering reactivating one of the pipelines to handle palm oil transfers when the BlueEarth Biofuels biodiesel refinery is built at Maui Electric’s Waena generating site.

The Clean Islands Council was called, and an eight-man rapid response team flew from Honolulu to Maui on the first flight Wednesday.

Harbors Division and MECO employees had already set out booms during the night. Although it was difficult to see the dark oil at night, they were successful in getting barriers up that limited the range of the spill by 2 a.m.

The equipment was right at hand, in a boathouse the council maintains at Pier 1.

Kim Beasley, general manager of the Clean Islands Council, said it was the first time the council’s reaction team had ever had to come to Kahului.

Pfister said it was the second oil spill that anyone knows about. The other, of just a few gallons from a tug, was cleaned up by harbor workers using the council’s absorbent materials but without calling the rapid response team.

Beasley said Kahului has the best setup in the state. A boat hangs from the roof of the boathouse, and 1,200 feet of containment booms lie ready. “All we have to do is lower the boat” and pull the booms out.

On Wednesday morning, the boom was pulled tighter and tighter, concentrating the oil. Some could be pumped out, with the rest absorbed by blue and white mats set out to soak up the oil.

Beasley said this is the preferred method, because the mats are sent to H-Power on Oahu to be burned to produce electricity.

It was difficult to estimate how much No. 6 industrial heavy oil was in the water, because some of it was under the pier. MECO estimated 100 to 300 gallons in all.

Company communications specialist Kau’i Awai-Dickson said MECO did not know why the oil was there. Standard procedure is to clean and seal unused pipes, and MECO could not

determine why any oil was still in the line.

She said the break was apparently due to rust. She said there are other options for moving palm oil to the island if the pipeline is not usable.

"We are trying to figure out why it happened," she said.

Pfister was called to the harbor at about 6:45 p.m. – about the same time MECO was facing an islandwide power outage because of failure of a main generator at Maalaea.

Awai-Dickson said separate teams responded to each emergency, and MECO had enough staff to handle both.

Pfister said cooperation from almost everybody was outstanding.

Pier 1 was comparatively quiet and the spill did not affect any other harbor operations, except the Pride of Hawaii, which remained offshore through the day waiting for clearance to dock.

Beasley said a heavy oil spill is easier to deal with, because it does not give off explosive fumes the way lighter oils do. No wildlife was observed in the oil.

The Clean Islands Council is funded by Hawaii businesses that ship or use large amounts of petroleum – the two refineries on Oahu, barge and cruise lines, utilities and similar operations.

It maintains a 130-foot emergency response vessel at Pier 30 in Honolulu, and stores equipment and supplies at harbors on the main islands. Three times a year, council staff trains at Kahului Harbor, and they also give hazardous materials handling and management training.

Equipment is checked and materials are rotated regularly, Beasley said, so that when emergency responders opened the boathouse, everything was ready to go.

The council itself has only a few full-time employees, but it contracts with private businesses to provide on-call teams.

The men who cleaned up Kahului Harbor Wednesday were from Pacific Environmental Co. They spend most days working on hazardous materials remediation or prevention for private businesses.

Beasley said the council's goal is to corral a spill within two to 12 hours. Tuesday's spill was comparatively easy to handle, because it was small and the weather was calm.

Pfister said the incident provided "a good exercise for everybody."

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