

MCA pelted in pollution report

THE UK has not had a serious oil spill since the *Sea Empress* incident six years ago but the Maritime & Coastguard Agency (MCA) came in for some criticism in a major report published this week.

Among the key findings in a report called "Dealing with Pollution from Ships", published by the National Audit Office (NAO), the MCA was told it should be able to demonstrate that the UK is meeting its commitments under international counter-pollution conventions.

This should be achieved by ensuring that all ports and harbours have plans in place to deal with a medium-size oil spill and have staff trained to be able to regularly test the plans. It was found that only about 40% of the 170 local

coastal authorities have attended MCA training sessions and 53 authorities have contingency plans introduced between five and 11 years ago.

Despite a considerable saving of around £1.7m by outsourcing some of its services, further savings can be made by sharing surveillance aircraft and counter-pollution equipment with other regulatory bodies or by signing contracts for its supply with commercial interests. The report also called on the MCA to review all the resources at its disposal, to assess its ability to cope with a major spill and in particular to be able to deal with more than one incident simultaneously.

As part of its post-incident evaluation, records should be kept of how much pollution is

prevented or how much of its potential damaging effects has been reduced.

NAO also suggests that the MCA should work more closely with the relevant government department to bring the requirements of the international protocol on hazardous and noxious substances (HNS) into UK law. The MCA should also ensure that all major ports and harbours implement measures as soon as possible to deal with any incident involving HNS.

The so-called "pay to be paid" type of insurance policies are a major problem. Here the MCA is recommended to co-operate with the department and other maritime authorities to prohibit such insurance. Wider recovery powers should be investigated in



LAST ONE: cleaning up after the "Sea Empress" spill in 1996

the cases of "one-ship" companies, especially where there are sister concerns.

The other major recommendation is that the Merchant Shipping legislation should be revised to ensure that pollution incidents may be prosecuted under the UK's oil pollution laws wherever incidents occur within the UK Pollution Control Zone. (See also page 23.)