

PRESS RELEASE



COMMUNIQUE

DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

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STUDY BY INTERNATIONAL JOINT COMMISSION
OF OIL POLLUTION IN LAKE ERIE

The Department of External Affairs today released the following letter requesting the International Joint Commission to report on the adequacy of:

- a) existing drilling regulations to prevent pollution of Lake Erie by oil, and
- b) existing means of cleaning up a major oil spill in the Lake deriving from any source.

A similar letter is being sent to the Commission by the State Department in Washington.

(see attachment)

I refer to your letter of April 11, 1968, reporting the results of an exploratory meeting convened by the International Joint Commission approximately a year ago to obtain information about the programmes for drilling for oil and gas in Lake Erie which are in effect or are contemplated by the Province of Ontario and certain of the riparian States. In that letter you reported that the responsible State and Provincial officials considered that there was minimal risk of pollution of the Lake's waters from drilling and production operations and that "with existing technology, any accidental escape of oil would be limited to a matter of minutes".

The recent serious oil spill off the coast of California may cast some doubt on the proposition that existing technology is adequate to confine the destructive consequences of a runaway oil well or that the risks of serious pollution can be described as minimal. The Californian experience suggests the necessity of a careful review of safety precautions and procedures applicable in Lake Erie, particularly in view of the shallow and confined nature of this body of water.

Accordingly the Commission is requested as a matter of urgency within the framework of the existing International Joint Commission pollution reference dated October 7, 1964, on Lake Erie, Lake Ontario and the International Section of the St. Lawrence River to investigate and to make a special report at the earliest possible date on the following matters:

- (1) The adequacy of existing safety requirements and procedures in Canada and in the United States applicable to drilling and production operations in Lake Erie to prevent oil from escaping into the Lake so as to produce serious transboundary oil pollution conditions;
- (2) The adequacy of existing mechanical, chemical and other methods of confining, dispersing and cleaning up any major oil spill that may occur in Lake Erie from any source, bearing in mind the damage that such methods may cause to marine life, domestic water supplies or to other beneficial uses of the Lake in both countries; and
- (3) The adequacy of existing contingency plans and the action taken to implement them to confine and clean up transboundary pollution and to prevent or mitigate the destructive transboundary effects of any major oil spill from any source that may occur in Lake Erie.

If the Commission finds that any of the existing safety requirements, methods or plans referred to in clauses numbered (1), (2) and (3), respectively are inadequate, the Commission is requested to make recommendations as to what action should be taken to correct any such inadequacy.

Moreover if after preliminary investigation the Commission is of the opinion that certain interim measures are necessary with respect to one or more of the matters being herein referred to it, the Commission is requested to make recommendations concerning any such measures in advance of submitting its main report and recommendations.

The Governments of Canada and the United States are equally concerned about the risk of serious oil pollution in the Great Lakes from other sources, notably major oil spills from marine or industrial mishaps such as those referred to in your letter of April 11, 1968. The discharges of oil from land-based sources and from normal vessel operations is already being studied by the Commission. The threat of major oil pollution as a result of a disaster to a vessel in the Great Lakes involves broader international consideration. This aspect of the overall problem is under study by the two Governments through other appropriate channels.

I am advised that a similar letter is being sent by the Under-Secretary of State of the United States to the Chairman of the United States Section.