

Cruise Ship Operators to Plead Guilty to Dumping Oil in Sea

By MATTHEW L. WALD
The operators of a 700-passenger cruise ship have agreed to plead guilty to two felony counts of intentionally dumping oil in the Atlantic off Florida and pay a \$500,000 fine.

The case is the first criminal prosecution under a tough law approved by Congress after the Exxon Valdez spilled more than 10 million gallons of crude oil off Alaska in 1989.

The cruise ship, the Viking Princess, was caught dumping the oil by a Coast Guard surveillance plane looking for spills. The monitoring was part of an aggressive campaign early last year that included patrols by Coast Guard vessels with agents of the F.B.I. and Environmental Protection Agency aboard. In the past, most prosecutions for oil spills have resulted from the authorities' coming on them in the course of other activities or from oil's reaching the shore, leading investigators to search looking for the source.

But in this case tips from people who were not identified prompted the Coast Guard to set up the marine equivalent of a highway speed trap, using a jet with radar that finds oil by measuring its suppression of waves. The radar can also sense the temperature difference between ocean water and oil floating on it and can discern oil at a distance so great that a ship's crew cannot spot the plane in time to stop the discharge, officials say. Prosecutors said the oil was from the ship's bilges, where it accumulates in normal operation but is supposed to be collected and held for proper disposal.

Focus on Deliberate Dumping
At a news conference in Miami on Thursday involving the Justice Department, Federal Bureau of Investigation and Environmental Protection Agency, officials said they were looking for small releases that were not caused by accidents and formerly were seldom prosecuted.

"There's little that law enforcement can do directly about events of nature," said Kendall Coffey, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of Florida, referring to oil spills. "But deliberate dumping of oil into the ocean is at the heart of what we can deter."
Mr. Coffey said of the small amounts of oil involved in dumping incidents: "Cumulatively the effect is very significant."
Prosecutors did not say how much oil was involved in the dumping by the Viking Princess. The oil was being collected in the bilge and mixed with salt water that leaks into the ship. The ship is supposed to use

an oil-water separator, usually a centrifuge-type device, to take the oil out of the dock for disposal on land. Some environmental experts say cruise ships may release this oil off at sea or off-load it in countries with less stringent rules. But the Viking Princess often sticks close to shore near Palm Beach, Fla., often taking up to 700 passengers on day trips for fares from \$39 to \$90. It also makes overnight trips to Freeport, the Bahamas, carrying 350 passengers for \$70 to \$125 each, depending on accommodations.

In a telephone interview, the lawyer for the ship's owners and operators, Benedict P. Kuehne, of Miami, said, "It was agreed the amount was not such as to cause environmental harm, but neither side has any way of knowing how much it was."
But papers filed by the prosecutors in Federal District Court in Miami, the amount released was called a "harmful quantity." That is required under the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, for the action to constitute a felony. The law also strengthened the had of prosecutors when oil releases happen more than three miles from shore, which is precisely where the Viking Princess operated.

The ship, which is registered in Panama and is operated for its owners by Palm Beach Cruises, was caught by a Coast Guard plane on Feb. 19, 1993. In six days, the plane monitored more than 150 vessels and found "six significant sheens," the Coast Guard said in a videotape. The Viking Princess, the plane made a videotape that shows a J-shaped sheen of oil trailing for about two-and-one-half miles behind the white-hulled ship.

No Savings Seen
Despite the videotape, Palm Beach Cruises said in a news release that "the company's internal investigation was not able to confirm the charges." The company said it agreed to plead guilty "in an effort to demonstrate our commitment to a clean environment."

Rear Adm. William P. Leahy, commander of the seventh Coast Guard District, which covers South Carolina, Georgia, most of Florida and the Caribbean, said at a news conference in Miami that it would have cost the cruise line "probably about \$1,500" to dispose of the waste oil legally in port.

Mr. Kuehne said in a telephone interview that oil disposal costs for the ship were "several hundred dollars every six months."
"Dumping the bilge water without cleaning out the oil "would not save the company any money," Mr.

Kuehne said. He identified very few of the Gr. Kuehne owners, ment on further hiring as be appr

Sting nets traffickers with green card lure

Federal agents promise green cards to catch some of the most violent criminals in South Florida.

By Warren Richey
FORT LAUDERDALE (SUN-SENTINEL) —

In early 1993, word spread in Broward neighborhoods among illegal Jamaicans that a "consultant" in Pembroke Pines was selling U.S. "green cards."

The price for the governmental residency documents a half pound of cocaine or \$5,000 in cash.

What the undocumented Jamaicans did not know was that the "consultant" was actually an undercover federal agent running a nationwide sting operation aimed at identifying and arresting members of Jamaican drug trafficking gangs.

Working out of what was supposed to be an immigration consulting agency, the agent used the promise of a genuine green card to lure here some of the most violent criminals in South Florida, officials

said. It worked better than anyone expected.

Word not only spread among Jamaican criminals in Broward and Dade counties, but was passed on to criminal associates in cities as far away as Los Angeles and New York.

It took two-and-a-half years to spring the trap.

But this week it slammed shut in Miami with the unsealing of 41 indictments naming 119 suspects.

"Today was to be Green Card Day," said U.S. Attorney Kendall Coffey. "They were trading white powder for green cards. Now they'll be trading illegal trafficking for prison bars."

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Word went out that the green cards would be available Wednesday — Coffey's reference to Green Card Day. These cards were used to obtain their cards.

Most are wanted on charges that include purchasing fake immigration documents, possession with intent to distribute cocaine, conspiracy to distribute cocaine and alien smuggling. Agents said they seized \$90,000 in cash and 110 pounds of cocaine during the undercover operation.

Officials said the investigation uncovered seven Jamaican gangs operating in the United States and 25 drug-smuggling groups.

Officials said five of the suspects who obtained temporary residence cards during the undercover were killed before they could be arrested. The killings were thought to be connected to the suspects' drug trafficking, police said.

"We're dealing with a group of people who have a propensity for violence," said Paul Mallett of the FBI, adding that four of the initial six people arrested Wednesday were armed.

Of the 28 suspects charged in South Florida on Wednesday, all but two live in Broward County. Others include 45 suspects in Los Angeles, 20 in New York City, 20 in Philadelphia, three in Springfield, Mass., and three in Trenton, N.J.

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Cruise line admits it dumped oil

By JOHN FERNANDEZ
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

MIAMI — As passengers gathered their belongings on the final leg of a cruise billed as the "Perfect One Day Getaway," operators of the Viking Princess intentionally dumped waste oil from its bilge less than 4 miles from the Port of Palm Beach.

Unknown to the ship's crew and passengers, a Coast Guard aircraft with sophisticated radar equipment along a 2½-mile swath was videotaping the

incident was shown by the Office as federal of the first criminal violation Act of 1990. They justy, pleasure boaters at a crackdown on oil around South Florida, a

U.S. aims to clean up ocean oil

Cruise line deal comes amid war on pollution

By WARREN RICHEY
and TOM STIEGHORST
Staff Writers

MIAMI — The federal government has declared war on oil pollution at sea. It came as a Palm Beach County-based cruise line admitted guilty to federal felony charges of deliberately dumping waste oil from its Viking Princess cruise ship and failure to report the discharge.

As part of a plea agreement, Palm Beach Cruise Line of Boca Raton agreed to pay a \$500,000 fine for causing a 2.5-mile-long oil slick off the Port of Palm Beach in February 1993. The deal, announced on Thursday, still has to be approved by a judge.

The action, the first of its kind, is good news for environmentalists and for people who are tired of stepping on sticky globs of staining tar that often foul South Florida's beaches. Waste fuel oil pumped illegally from ship bilges can ultimately end up as tar balls on local beaches, officials said.

"We know that too much of it is going on," U.S. Attorney Kendall Coffey said. "We are going to find out who is doing it, and we are going to prosecute them."

Coffey said the case was the first criminal conviction in the nation under a new oil pollution law enacted after the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989.

In their anti-pollution fight, the Coast Guard and federal environmental officials employed some of the same high-tech tracking and detection systems the U.S. military used against Saddam Hussein during Desert Storm.

Rather than military targets, the new enemies are commercial ships and

PLEASE SEE POLLUTION / 4A

Technology helps catch polluters

If the Viking Princess cruise ship had waited until it reached its home port of Palm Beach before pumping waste oil from its bilges, it would have paid about \$1,500 to dispose of the oil in an environmentally safe manner.

But because the ship's crew chose to save the \$1,500 by dumping the oil in the Atlantic Ocean less than four miles offshore, it now is liable to pay \$500,000 in fines under a new federal crackdown on seaborne polluters.

The Viking Princess' penny-wise but pound-foolish exercise in environmental degradation was detected and videotaped in February 1993 by Coast Guard aircraft equipped with sophisticated radar, infrared sensors and cameras.

U.S. Attorney Kendall Coffey said the case marked the first criminal conviction in the nation under oil pollution legislation enacted after the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster in Alaska's Prince William Sound.

While not admitting the charges, the owners of the cruise line agreed to pay the fine to avoid a trial. A federal judge could reject the plea agreement and require the operators to face charges that could result in a fine of up to \$1 million and 10 years' probation.

Both the Coast Guard and passengers with camcorders keep an eye on cruise ships.

Using high-technology surveillance equipment originally developed for the Defense Department, the Coast Guard has begun concentrating on commercial ships, cruise liners and large private yachts in its heightened campaign against polluters.

It's about time. The sticky, repulsive globs of petroleum-based tar that befoul so many Atlantic beaches have bothered South Florida bathers for years. The source of the pollution never has been in question, but up until now there has been no effective enforcement.

That situation is changing and the experience of the Viking Princess should serve as a cautionary lesson to future would-be polluters.

From now on, not only will Big Brother be watching from his eagle eye in the sky, but every passenger with a camcorder and a sense of responsibility just might turn out to be a whistleblower, too.

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