

Guide to writing letters to the editor re the Rena spill

Writing letters to the editor is an effective way to put across ideas that may be shared in whole or in part by other people, but which may or may not be seen on the various other pages of a newspaper. They can mobilise, inform, criticise or support people or positions that are topical for the paper's other readers.

People do read the letters to the editor page.

Attached is a list of addresses for emailing letters to the editor, and the rules each newspaper has for the publication of letters. And following are some tips.

- You're voicing your own opinions when you write letter to the editor, which of course means you can say what you like. Because you are not necessarily expressing official Greenpeace policy, please do not describe yourself as a Greenpeace supporter, volunteer, employee, or advisor.
- Don't be tempted to ignore the word limit; the sub-editors at the paper will most likely either abridge your letter (never good), or they just won't publish it.
- Don't get personal in your criticisms of a particular government or industry figure; it's never a good look.
- Don't assume that the reader hasn't seen the story or letter that you may be responding to. That's not to say that a letter to the editor has to be in response to something that has run previously – letters just have to be topical, that's all.
- Don't send your letter to more than one paper. While it may be tempting, they will eventually pick up on what you are doing, and you will be blacklisted (most papers are owned by a company that also owns other papers). Also, don't use pseudonyms.

Below are some facts and figures that Greenpeace has been making that may help you construct your letter.

The Rena spill is a warning to us all - of how difficult it is to deal with even a small oil spill at sea, and the devastating impacts.

But if this accident had involved a blowout from one of the planned deepwater oil rigs – then we could be looking at millions of barrels of oil spilt, not hundreds.

That's what the Government is risking with its plans to auction off the rights to deep sea oil drilling off some of the country's most spectacular pieces of coast, such as Northland's West Coast, the East Cape, the Caitlins and Stewart Island.

The cost to our economy and livelihoods could amount to billions.

Support facts:

Anadarko, which had a 25 per cent share in the Deepwater Horizon well, intends to start drilling exploratory deep sea wells off the South Island next year.

Some of the areas being sold off are even deeper than the water the Horizon was working in when it exploded; meaning the risk of disaster is even higher.

In 2003 the Capella Voyager tanker carrying 126,823,466 litres of oil ran aground near Whangarei. Luckily it did not spill its load. If the Government's plans for deep sea oil drilling go ahead, we will see many more large oil tankers operating in NZ waters increasing the risk of another accident.

Drilling will be happening at depths of up to 3000 metres – more than twice the depth the Deepwater Horizon was exploring in when the US Gulf of Mexico oil disaster occurred

And just because a well might be exploratory, it could still contain enough oil to cause a disaster ... the Deepwater Horizon's well was an exploratory one too.

NEW ZEALAND IS CLEARLY NOT EQUIPPED TO DEAL WITH A MAJOR OIL SPILL:

The people on the ground dealing with this spill are clearly doing their best but are simply overwhelmed and unable to deal with the magnitude of the disaster.

The crucial lesson from this tragedy is just how difficult it is to deal with oil spills at sea. Even a slow, and relatively accessible oil spill like this one has clearly stretched New Zealand's response capability to beyond its limits.

If we can't control the spill from Rena, then we have no chance of containing a deep sea oil drilling disaster.

Support facts:

When the Rena first struck the Astrolabe reef it was carrying 2 million litres of oil.

780 million litres of oil is what BP's Deepwater Horizon oil well disgorged into the Gulf of Mexico. The spill ran unchecked for 3 long months and devastated both wildlife and local fishing and tourism. A major reason it took so long to stop the leak was the extreme depths the oil companies were drilling in.

It took over 6000 ships to try (unsuccessfully) to clean up the Gulf of Mexico spill – New Zealand wouldn't have a hope of mustering that many.

IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO CLEAN UP AN OIL SPILL

It is important to acknowledge that a real 'clean-up' in the sense of recovering all the oil and getting the beaches back to normal, is not possible. Mitigation – in other words helping the environment to recover - is all that can be done.

Impacts of spills can last a very long time - oil can still be found under the sand in Prince William Sound, Alaska, where the *Exxon Valdez* spilt its load in 1989