

DENR puts initial oil spill damage to environment at P7 billion

THE Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) has placed environmental damage caused by the Oriental Mindoro oil spill at P7 billion.

This was revealed by DENR Secretary Maria Antonia Yulo-Loyzaga during an interview in ANC's Headstart.

Environmentalists have expressed dismay over what they describe as the inadequate response of the government and the DENR, the agency mandated to manage the country's natural wealth.

In particular, they want the DENR to come up with a damage assessment of the disaster, dismayed that the agency was slow even to come up with public pronouncements and update of its ongoing coastal cleanup and damage assessment activities.

The MT Princess Empress sank off the waters of Naujan on February 28, 2023.

It was carrying 900,000 liters of industrial oil that continue to spread in various coastal towns in the Mimaropa, particularly Oriental Mindoro, and the Western Visayas Region.

The estimate was based on "what could be exposed by way of coral reefs, seagrasses, mangroves and fisheries," the DENR chief was quoted in a statement.

"The possible exposure area for us is P7 billion," Loyzaga said, referring to the initial estimated cost of the environmental damage caused by the oil spill.

However, she said the DENR would need to "actually go underneath and verify" once it is safe to dive in waters severely affected by the oil spill.

“We’re not allowed to fish in the area. We’re also not allowed to dive yet, but we want to do that immediately because we want to observe what the physical impacts are,” Loyzaga pointed out.

“What we have to do now is verify on the ground how much of these reefs have actually been touched, how many of the mangroves have actually been destroyed, and how many of the seagrasses have actually been affected,” she added.

During the interview, the apparently defensive Loyzaga explained the role of the DENR in the “whole-of-government” response to the oil spill disaster.

“The DENR is responsible for offshore and nearshore contamination and impacts,” Loyzaga explained.

“The general operation is legally under the direction of the Philippine Coast Guard [PCG]. So they are onsite right where the source is happening. We are left to actually work on the forensics, what is happening, where the hazards going, what will be affected, and our area is nearshore and offshore.”

Loyzaga said the DENR was first on the scene as soon as the news about the oil spill broke out. The DENR chief said that on Day One, she was already meeting with Oriental Mindoro Governor Bonz Dolor and had a technical meeting with PCG and other agencies involved in the oil spill response.

On Day Two, Loyzaga said the DENR teams were already on the ground testing the water and air in oil spill-hit areas.

“Day Three, we deployed the mapping ship of NAMRIA. Why? Nobody could say where the ship had sunk and we didn’t have a remotely operated vessel, so we sent the mapping ship we used to map the Philippine Rise to actually identify where the ship was underneath the water,” she narrated.

She said that from the third to fifth day, the DENR was already coordinating with the University of the Philippines-Marine Science Institute, the Department of Social Welfare and Development, the Department of Labor and Employment, the Department of Tourism, and the private sector.

“Every step of the way, we actually reported to the President,” Loyzaga added.