

British experts help Mauritius protect coral reefs from oil spill

The UK Government has sent three British ecology experts and one marine legal expert to Mauritius to support the next phase of the country's response to a devastating oil spill, after a ship containing 4,000 litres of fuel ran aground and broke up near environmentally protected coral reefs.

The scientists, from the UK's Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (Cefas) and funded by UK aid, flew from the UK on Wednesday evening (19 August) at the request of the Mauritian Government.

The ecology experts will assess the scale of the damage and help the African island to identify the best ways to restore its coastline and protect the thousands of animal species now at risk of oil pollution. They will work with local experts and communities to achieve this.

On top of that, a package of legal and technical advice will be provided on how to safely dispose of the stricken ship with a marine expert deploying to the scene, supported by a team of lawyers and marine consultants working remotely from the UK.

The UK has also committed £10,000 of new emergency support for the Mauritius Wildlife Fund to support its urgent work to help the local nature reserves directly impacted by the oil spill.

Mauritius is a biodiversity hot spot with a high concentration of plants and animals unique to the region. The oil spill has caused significant damage near two protected marine ecosystems. The British scientists will advise on how to minimise damage to the unique coral reefs and how to protect them against future threats.

The incident could affect the island's tourism industry, already impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. Other scientists have deemed the oil spill as the country's worst ecological disaster.

UK Minister for Africa James Duddridge said:

Without action, the devastating oil spill in Mauritius risks causing enormous damage to the environment and suffering to the fishing communities who rely on the coast for food and income.

I'm proud that the UK is sending experts who will play an important role in assessing the damage, supporting local communities and protecting the environment for future generations.

We will continue to work closely with Mauritius, as a friend and Commonwealth partner, to help them recover quickly from this national emergency.

The Department for International Development (DFID), The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and The Department for Environmental and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) are working with Cefas, a world-leading UK Government agency specialising in marine science and technology, to urgently respond to the request for assistance from Mauritius.

A British oil spill expert, in consultation with the International Maritime Organisation, has been on the ground in Mauritius since the beginning of the crisis, supporting the United Nations team to advise the local authorities on how to limit the environmental damage.

Senior marine monitoring scientist at Cefas, Dr Sue Ware, who is going to help in Mauritius said:

We have been observing the oil spill in Mauritius closely and will be offering our support to assist in environmental impact assessment and monitoring to help tackle the pollution – thereby, helping protect livelihoods, the environment and marine life.

We will work closely with the expert team on the ground, and our colleagues back in the UK laboratory, to apply our experience in marine emergency response to the situation.

Note to editors:

- The Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (Cefas) is a world leader in marine science and technology, providing innovative solutions for the aquatic environment, biodiversity and food security. Cefas is an Executive Agency of Defra and the UK's most diverse centre for applied marine and freshwater science and research. For more information about Cefas visit www.cefas.co.uk and follow @CefasGovUK