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Russian Government Estimates Black Sea Oil Spill Damage at $1B

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Russia's recent oil spill off the Black Sea coast has caused an estimated 84.9 billion rubles ($1 billion) in environmental damage, the government environmental watchdog Rosprirodnadzor said Friday.

The spill occurred after two aging Russian tankers — Volgoneft 212 and Volgoneft 239 — released thousands of tons of heavy fuel oil during a storm on Dec. 15. Volgoneft 212 split in half and sank, while Volgoneft 239 ran aground.

Volunteers and emergency crews have since worked to remove oil and contaminated sand from beaches in the southern Krasnodar region and annexed Crimea.

Rosprirodnadzor head Svetlana Radionova said the tankers' owners, Kama Shipping and Volgatransneft, have one month to voluntarily pay 49.4 billion rubles ($583 million) and 35.4 billion rubles ($415 million), respectively, or face lawsuits.

Both companies already face multiple lawsuits from regional prosecutors, the Russian Maritime Rescue Service and the resort town of Anapa.

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Meanwhile, Transportation Minister Roman Starovoit said Friday that his ministry had completed an investigation into the oil spill and would submit its findings to Russia's investigative authorities.

"The main cause of the accident was the failure of the captains and owners to comply with seasonal navigation restrictions," Starovoit said, adding that the ships were also staffed with unqualified personnel.

The captain of Volgoneft 212 has been placed in pre-trial detention, while Volgoneft 239's captain is under house arrest on charges of violating maritime safety rules.

Meanwhile, satellite images show that oil slicks have continued to appear near the wreck site as recently as March 31, despite no new spills being officially reported, according to the investigative outlet Agentstvo.

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