

Talia M. Wilson
Media Rhetoric
11/11/03
Panel Analysis – Brent Spar

The Brent Spar controversy revolves around one of the 350 oil-drilling platforms in the North Sea, this particular one – named Brent Spar – owned by the Shell Oil Company.

In 1995, UK Shell announced it was going to dispose of Brent Spar by sinking it off the coast of Scotland, having already received approval from the UK Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of the Environment. The only thing standing in their way was the task of obtaining approval from the Scottish Office. The platform was to be sunk 150 miles off Scotland's shore, its contaminants expected to only affect an area of a few hundred meters. The rig had been inactive since 1991, and its storage tanks were used to store wastes from other drilling operations.

However, two days after the announcement, Greenpeace dropped 12 protestors onto the rig, as it felt the sinking would set a precedent for disposal of drilling and storage rigs. They claimed the platform contained high amounts of toxic and radioactive substances. The protestors remained for three weeks and then left without incident or press coverage.

About a month later, German members of parliament asked the Brits to rescind their approval of sinking the platform. Also joining their boycott of the decision was German fisherman, Greenpeace and the Green Party.

The next month, Royal Dutch Shell reaffirmed the decision to sink the Brent Spar and published several full-page newspaper advertisements. Dutch Nature and Environment Foundation pleaded with consumers to join the German boycott. The following day, German press reported that the UK regarded the upcoming sinking as “sound environmental practice.”

On June 20, 1995, UK Shell suddenly – and unexpectedly – reconsiders and seeks a license for onshore disposal. A few months later, Greenpeace apologises for misinforming about oil content in the rig's storage wastes and admits testing was improperly conducted.