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Governor Signs New Marine Protection Measures

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Sacramento, California — Governor Pete Wilson recently signed into law Senate Bill 1644 that requires non-tank vessels over 300 gross tons to have an approved oil spill contingency plan and 300 million dollars in financial assurances to cover damages from an oil spill before entering California state waters. The bill sets a deadline of September 1, 1999 for these ships to have their spill plans and financial assurances in place.

The Lempert-Keene-Seastrand oil spill prevention and response act that became law in 1990 required oil tankers and barges that carry large quantities of oil to have oil spill contingency plans and up to 750 million dollars in financial assurances in case of an oil spill, but exempted other types of large ships that carried large quantities of fuel, from these requirements. This bill will cover large ships such as dry cargo carriers, cruise ships and ships importing automobiles that don't carry oil as cargo, but carry as much as 1 million gallons of oil as fuel.

Pete Bontadelli, the Administrator of the Office of Spill Prevention and Response, the office that is tasked with approving the spill contingency plans and verifying that the vessels have the appropriate financial assurances, stated that his office conducted an extensive review of coastal protection measures and it was recognized that spills from non-tank vessels pose a substantial risk to the marine environment. Half of California's significant oil spills in the last two decades have come from fuel tanks of non-tank vessels, including a November 1997 spill of 4,500 gallons into Humboldt Bay. Mr. Bontadelli further stated, "That since the enactment of the Lempert-Keene-Seastrand Act, Senate Bill 1644 is one of the most important pieces of legislation designed to protect our delicate marine ecosystem and I am pleased that the non-tank vessel industry and the Pacific Merchant Shipping Association recognized the risks and agreed to sponsor the bill."

The bill, signed yesterday, would take effect on January 1. The Office of Spill Prevention and Response anticipates that enabling regulations would be circulated in the spring of next year.

Mr. Bontadelli said that his office looks forward to working with industry and other public agencies, such as the United States Coast Guard, in implementing the very important provisions of this bill.

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