Oil leak focuses on Indonesian side

Orders from Federal Government

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THE Federal Government told scientists monitoring the huge oil leak off Australia’s northern coast to focus on the Indonesian side of the leaking well.

The instruction meant waters closer to the Australian coast, which contain more biodiversity and include important whale habitats, were not assessed for oil contamination in a report that the federal Environment Department released on Friday.

To complicate matters, fire broke out yesterday on the oil rig, which has been leaking oil into the Timor Sea for 10 weeks. Oil field operator PTTEP Australia said the West Atlas rig and Montara well-head platform were on fire.

No one on board the rig was reported injured and all non-essential workers were being evacuated.

The scientist in charge of the survey — which found dead animals and signs that some species were being lured towards the oil slick — has since called for more testing to be done on the Australian side of the leaking well.

Led by Queensland University marine biology specialist Dr James Watson, scientists conducted five days of monitoring at sea, and a further three days on islands around Ashmore Reef.

Maps of investigation show that all monitoring was done north of the leak, and Dr Watson said this was a result of government instructions.

The instructions appear to be influenced by the belief that most of the oil is billowing north of the rig, but Dr Watson said investigations on the Australian side were still important.

“Our study was limited to the north of the oil rig,” he said. “I think it would be important, to ascertain the full affects of this oil leak, to do surveys to the south as well. As far as we know, no one has done that yet.”

The Environment Department said it had asked the scientists to focus on the north side of the rig because this was where much of the oil was located.

“It was critical that the survey focus on areas where oil was concentrated,” said a spokeswoman Catherine McDonald. “At the time when the survey was conducted, oil and sheen were concentrated to the north of the platform.”

The department said a long-term monitoring plan, agreed to by the Government and the company responsible for the spill, would ensure that bigger areas of the Timor Sea were monitored in future, including those south of the leak. Australian Conservation Foundation spokesman Chris Smyth said environmental monitoring of the Montara leak had been “very ad-hoc”.

“We are very concerned about the limitations put on the scope of the survey,” he said.

Friday’s report on the leak’s environmental impact was the second the Government has published.

The legitimacy of the first report was undermined when fish caught near the leak were frozen when they were sent to scientific analysts.

This meant the most reliable tests for oil contamination — using fish bile — could not be conducted.

Scientists told the Government their subsequent tests of fish flesh were “1000 times” less indicative than bile tests.