Information Data Sheet

Category Munitions Disposal at Sea

Description Both chemical and conventional munitions have been extensively dumped at sea since WWI.

In a few cases, the location and types of munitions are well known.

In many cases the locations and types are not well known due to insufficient record keeping, dumping of material intentionally or unintentionally outside agreed official dumping areas and, to some extent, the movement of dumped munitions to areas outside the disposal points.

The materials that have been dumped around the UK are mostly German, British, and American munitions, the vast majority being conventional weapons which were surplus to requirements at the end of WWI or WWII.

During WWI many munitions were dumped indiscriminately before vessels returned to shore. Between 1944 and the 1970s large scale disposal of munitions in the marine environment took place in both specified and unspecified locations.

For example, between July and October 1945, 14,000 tons of 5" artillery shells loaded with phosgene are recorded as being dumped in the Beaufort's Dyke trench off the coast of Scotland. Between 1945 and 1948 135,000 tons of both conventional and chemical munitions were dumped there, and between 1949 and the late 1950s approximately 20,000 tons/year were disposed of in the trench.

The last recorded dump at Beaufort's Dyke took place in 1976, when crews performed an emergency dump of a small number of 40mm shells.

The Scottish Government estimates that Beaufort's Dyke currently contains nearly 2 million tons of conventional munitions, 120,000 tons of mustard and phosgene gas, 25,000 tons of nerve gas, 330 tons of arsenic compounds and 1,890 tons of waste gases.

Hazard Some evidence indicates that following corrosion certain types of munitions are able to float and that these can wash ashore if disturbed. There are records indicating that, following pipe laying disturbance in the 1990s, explosives and case material from Beaufort's Dyke were encountered on beaches.

The potential UXO hazard from offshore munitions disposal sites is elevated for deep sea fishermen or those involved with offshore construction projects such as pipe laying, dredging and wind farms.