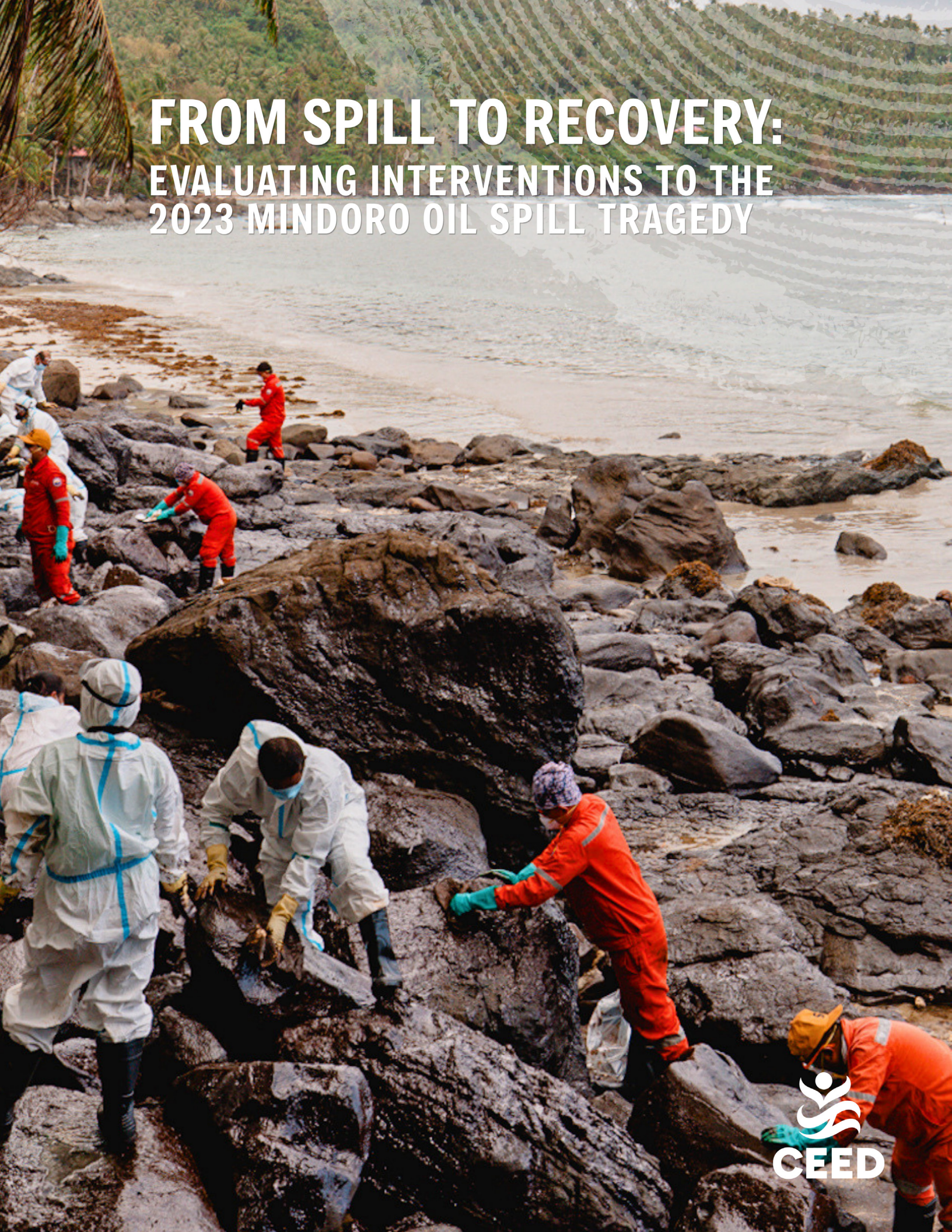


FROM SPILL TO RECOVERY:

EVALUATING INTERVENTIONS TO THE 2023 MINDORO OIL SPILL TRAGEDY

CEED

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Three years after the 2023 Mindoro oil spill, the Verde Island Passage (VIP) and the communities that rely on it continue to feel the impact. This report details and reviews the publicly reported response, rehabilitation and recovery efforts, and assesses the current condition of the VIP through independent water quality testing and seagrass monitoring undertaken in February 2026.

The report finds the quick response was poorly coordinated and delayed, and long-term environmental monitoring has been largely undone. The mechanism of compensation has been slow and partial and has not kept pace with the losses of affected communities.

All sampled marine protected areas (MPAs) continue to exceed the oil and grease threshold for protected waters and early gains in seagrass cover have been lost at three of four monitored sites. With no corridor-wide assessment, no public data on persistent pollutants, and no institution assigned to monitor recovery, the present state of the VIP and its communities remains undocumented.

Key Findings

- The spill involved a heavy, persistent fuel. Industrial fuel oil can retain up to 90% of its volume after release, whereas lighter crudes may lose up to 75% through evaporation within days. It contains high levels of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) that can persist in sediment and marine tissue for years. The spill resulted in environmental damages estimated at ₱40.1 billion and socio-economic losses worth ₱1.1 billion while the fishing ban affected the livelihood of 24,698 fisherfolk.
- The quick response was slow and uncoordinated. Containment equipment like booms and skimmers arrived only on the sixth day, allowing the slick to reach Batangas, Antique and Northern Palawan. As of March 11, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) still classified the spill as Tier 2 under the National Oil Spill Contingency Plan (NOSCP), even as Japan sent a technical team and the United States offered help. The response was only upgraded to Tier 3 on March 25, while the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) said the wreck was still leaking 35,000 to 50,000 liters of oil per day.
- Recovery programming is weighted toward socio-economic interventions. Most documented recovery efforts include cash assistance, livelihood kits, loans, and skills training. The report finds a clear absence of initiatives for long-term environmental monitoring and recovery, with the latest site assessment of DENR dated January 2024. Independent assessments are localized and fragmented, and only cover the towns of Pola and Pinamalayan.
- Persistent pollutants are not tracked. There is no public data on the PAHs of the spill except for oil spill bulletins from the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) from March to May 2023. PAHs can persist in sediment and organisms for years, representing a real but unacknowledged public health concern from chronic exposure in the most impacted areas
- The water quality in the affected MPAs is still poor. All six MPAs in Pola and Pinamalayan recorded oil-and-grease concentrations exceeding the Class SA protected waters limit of 1 mg/L in February 2026. Five of six failed in 2023, and six of six in 2024. Although it is unlikely that the oil and grease detected in the sampled areas are remnants of the 2023 oil spill, consistent results show the vulnerability of VIP coastal ecosystems to industrial pollutants from fossil fuel in the marine corridor.
- Seagrass recovery did not hold. Seagrass cover at four ground zero sites dropped sharply between March and July 2023, then rebounded to 63% to 89% by October 2023 and held through March 2024. As of February 2026, three of four sites declined: Tagumpay to 26% (67% decline from peak), Calima to 49% (return to baseline March 2023), and Puting Cacao to 0.5% (99% decline). Only Salong/Calero showed a net gain (48% to 63%) but has two survey rounds missing. The two sites with the steepest losses coincide with the two highest readings for oil and grease.

- Compensation remains insufficient and disputed. The International Oil Pollution Compensation (IOPC) Funds has paid ₱2.702 billion in 32,000 claims as of December 2024, but fisherfolk said the payouts were not enough to cover their losses and were mostly used to pay debts. Claimants had to go to Calapan to file, waited three to six months for payment, and had to sign a quitclaim to release future claims. The tanker's net tonnage of 200 tons also restricted the case to the second of three compensation tiers, keeping the compensation pool well below the scale of the damage.
- Accountability for the vessel's clearance is fragmented. Senate and House hearings yielded contradictory statements from the Maritime Industry Authority (MARINA), National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), and PCG regarding the permit and history of the tanker. No single agency is responsible for the pre-departure clearance process and no public official or corporation has been found criminally or administratively liable for the spill. The only legal action taken is the class action filed in December 2025 before the Regional Trial Court of Pinamalayan.
- The hearings did not lead to spill-specific legislation. Senate and Congress hearings have looked at the tanker's clearance, the government's response, and the quality of relief goods, but no legislation specifically in response to the oil spill has passed and the long-standing initiative to protect the VIP under the Expanded Integrated Protected Areas System (ENIPAS) Act has not been accomplished.

Recommendations

Four sets of recommendations are proposed to ensure that affected communities and ecosystems are able to recover fully, are protected from future oil spills, and that those responsible are held to account:

1. Priority interventions for rehabilitation
    a. Establish a centralized, marine corridor-wide environmental monitoring system for the VIP replacing the fragmented, limited coverage documented in this report, with recurring rather than one-off sampling across all affected MPAs, and use the results to pursue the designation of waters exceeding guidelines as non-attainment areas under Clean Water Act and of the VIP as water quality management area with corresponding action plan.
    b. Prioritize sustained monitoring of persistent and toxic pollutants, including PAHs, in directly impacted areas. Current public data stops at BFAR's 2023 bulletins, despite this report's own three-year water quality findings showing an unbroken run of failures.
    c. Commission a corridor-wide seagrass and coral reef status update building on Mindoro State University's longitudinal monitoring, given this report's finding that early recovery gains at three of four monitored sites had reversed by the three-year mark.
2. Policy reforms
    a. Push for a comprehensive law protecting the VIP from future oil spill disasters, including its designation under the ENIPAS Act.
    b. Strengthen navigational and cargo regulations for hazardous shipments transiting the VIP. Current laws such as the Clean Water Act and the Marine Pollution Decree do not impose navigational restrictions or heightened requirements on vessels carrying hazardous cargo through ecologically sensitive waters.

3. Community-based approaches to long-term recovery

    a. Conduct an updated, three-year community needs reassessment. All current health and livelihood data comes from 2023 and no comparable reassessment has been done since, leaving the present-day scale of unmet need undocumented.

    b. Simplify and localize the compensation claims process. The requirement to travel to Calapan, the three-to-six-month wait, and the quitclaim requirement, which this report's Gap Analysis identifies as a structural barrier, should be revisited to better match affected households' capacity and timeline.

4. Accountability and monitoring mechanisms

    a. Establish a clear governance structure, a decision tree or organizational chart, assigning defined roles and responsibilities among agencies for handling oil spill disasters in the VIP, addressing the coordination failures this report documents in both the Rapid Response and Gap Analysis sections.

    b. Support the ongoing push for just compensation through the December 2025 class suit, including its aim of securing court-ordered rehabilitation funding rather than damages alone.

    c. Pursue accountability not only against the shipowner, RDC Reield Marine Services, but also against SL Harbor Bulk Terminal Corporation, the charterer and owner of the spilled cargo, and its parent company, San Miguel Corporation (via San Miguel Shipping and Lighterage Corporation), and to public officials who were negligent in their performance of duties or who intentionally committed violations or illegal acts. The class suit already names SL Harbor as a defendant, but public and media attention has concentrated almost entirely on RDC Reield as the vessel operator. This report recommends that scrutiny, and any resulting accountability measures, financial or regulatory, extend equally to the corporation that owned and chartered the fuel being transported, since the Article 2176 Civil Code claim in the pending case rests partly on SL Harbor's own alleged failure of duty of care in chartering an unseaworthy vessel.

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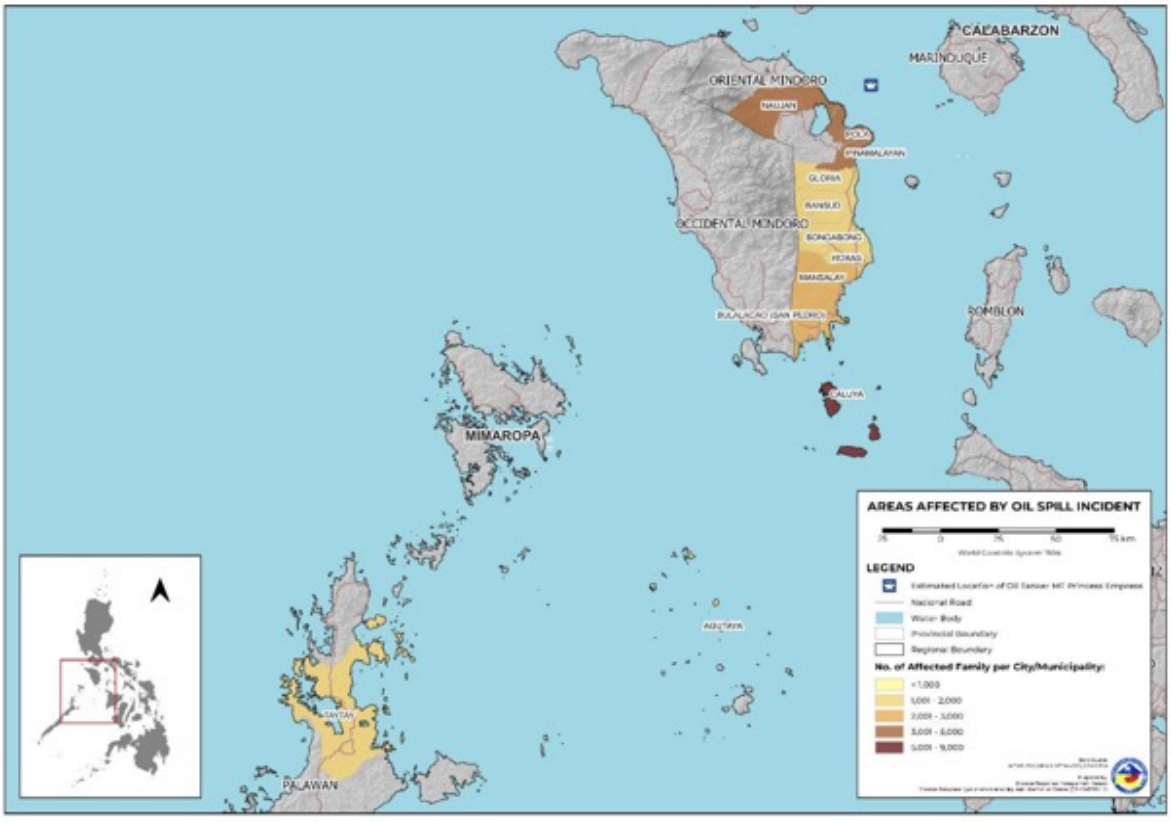
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INTRODUCTION

On February 28, 2023, the oil tanker MT Princess Empress travelling from Limay, Bataan to the City of Iloilo sank off the coast of Naujan, Oriental Mindoro carrying with it 800,000 liters of industrial fuel. In a matter of days, 92% of the transported fuel (~736,000 liters) were discharged into the surrounding waters of the VIP, contaminating one of the most biodiverse marine corridors of the country, and the center of the center of marine shorefish biodiversity in the Coral Triangle. The VIP is also the focal point for fossil fuel expansion in the country where large-scale operational facilities are concentrated in the city of Batangas and its neighboring coastal towns.

Rapid assessments conducted by multi-government agencies revealed the initial extent of the damage, with the spill contaminating 10 out of the 12 coastal municipalities and one city in Oriental Mindoro. Uncontained oil slicks travelled across the marine corridor reaching the provinces of Batangas, Antique, and Northern Palawan (Fig. 1), affecting 42,487 families across the three regions. Model estimates from the Marine Science Institute (MSI) reveal that an estimated 20,000 ha of coral reefs, 9,900 ha of mangrove forests, and 6,000 ha of seagrass beds were affected by the tragedy.[1]

Figure 1. Map of families affected by the 2023 Mindoro Oil spill per City or Municipality. Source: DSWD Incident Report as of March 20, 2023.



1 Marine Science Institute, "Bulletin 03: Over 36,000 ha of coral reefs, mangroves, and seagrass possibly affected by oil slick," March 4, 2023.

Clean-up, containment, and monitoring were undertaken by various government and non-government entities such as the DENR, PCG, BFAR, local government units (LGUs), and the academe. A province-wide fishing ban was also declared by BFAR one month after the incident in at least 10 municipalities, disrupting the livelihood of 24,698 fisherfolk across MIMAROPA, CALABARZON, and Western Visayas.[2]

Despite multi-party interventions, the spill still caused significant environmental and socio-economic damage to the three provinces across the VIP where an estimated ₱40.1 billion in environmental damage and ₱1.1 billion in socioeconomic losses was reported.[3]

This report commemorates the 2023 Mindoro oil spill tragedy and aims to document and examine all publicly reported initiatives conducted in response to the tragedy. The document also aims to evaluate the scope, outcomes, effectiveness, strengths and most importantly, the gaps in disaster management and initiatives in hopes of providing evidence-based insight to inform future response, recovery, and rehabilitation programs related to oil spill disasters.

2 Philippine News Agency, "24.6K fisherfolk so far affected by Oriental Mindoro oil spill," June 14, 2023, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1203490.

3 Center for Energy, Ecology, and Development. *The Big Bill of the Oil Spill in the Verde Island Passage.* February 2024.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Industrial fuel and its environmental effects

MT Princess Empress was carrying industrial fuel oil, a heavy residual fuel that behaves very differently in seawater than the lighter crude oils. Where light crude can lose up to 75% of its volume within days through evaporation, heavier industrial fuels can retain as much as 90% of their original volume, making them substantially more persistent in the marine environment.[4] This class of fuel also carries a high concentration of PAHs, compounds that resist degradation and can remain in sediment and marine tissue for years after a spill. Regulatory hazard documentation for residual fuel oil classifies it as acutely and chronically toxic to aquatic life, carcinogenic, and capable of causing organ damage through repeated exposure.[5]

Aside from direct impacts of oil and industrial fuel contamination as a result of spill, shipborne contaminants also have an immediate impact on marine ecosystems. Shipborne contaminants are essentially toxic substances that are collected and released to the environment in large quantities. These come in the form of wastewater discharge, ballast water, and bilge water. The ballast and bilge water which are used to make large cargo ships, such as liquified natural gas (LNG) and oil tankers, stable if discharged untreated, can represent major threats to the marine biodiversity. Among this is the introduction of invasive aquatic species in the marine environment which could compete with the endemic existing thriving species.

These incidents are only a fraction of many threats being confronted in the VIP. Unfortunately, the sinking of the MT Princess Empress was not the only instance of a vessel sinking that occurred in the VIP that year. August 27 of the same year, the ship, ANITA DJ II, came from Navotas Port in Manila but sank due to rough seas seven nautical miles off Cape Santiago in Calatagan, Batangas.[6] The fishing vessel carrying 70,000 liters of diesel fuel sank during Super Typhoon Saola's onslaught. There were immediate reports of oil sheens sighted. Another vessel, MV Joegie 5, also ran aground the coast of Paluan town in Occidental Mindoro the following month.[7]

Smaller oil spills and oil slicks occur regularly due to discharge of ballast and bilge water from ships traversing the ocean. According to Cerulean, SkyTruth's tool for detecting oil pollution in the ocean, there have been over 760 slicks in Philippine waters since it began analyzing satellite imagery in 2020. These smaller incidents along with unreported oil spill in the VIP sheds light on the vulnerability of VIP and likelihood of more incidents as shipping traffic increases over time.

4 Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, *Toxicological Profile for Fuel Oils*, June 1995, chap. 2, "Health Effects," https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK594684/.

5 National Research Council (US) Committee on Oil in the Sea: Inputs, Fates, and Effects, *Oil in the Sea III: Inputs, Fates, and Effects* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2003), chap. 4, "Behavior and Fate of Oil," https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK220700/.

6 John Eric Mendoza, "Fishing Vessel Sinks off Batangas, 13 Rescued — Coast Guard,"*INQUIRER.net*, August 28, 2023,https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1823100/pcg-rescues-13-crew-in-sunken-fishing-vessel-in-batangas.

7 Madonna Virola, "14 rescued from vessel that ran aground in Occidental Mindoro town," *INQUIRER.net,* September 3, 2023, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1825968/14-rescued-from-vessel-that-ran-aground-in-occidental-mindoro-town.

VIP and its significance

The Philippines is part of the Coral Triangle, a marine area known to be the center of marine biodiversity geographically located in the Indonesian-Philippines Region and the Far Southwestern Pacific Region. Within the Coral Triangle lies the 'center of the center of marine shore fish biodiversity' found in the Philippines known as the VIP due to the marine area's high marine biodiversity.[8] VIP is a marine strait that covers the coastal provinces of Batangas, Oriental Mindoro, Occidental Mindoro, Marinduque, and Romblon with an area of over 1.14 million ha supporting over 2.1 million Filipinos in terms of transportation, food security, and tourism. A report found out that VIP poses a high biodiversity presence of marine biodiversity including coral reefs, marine mammals, reef fishes, and marine reptiles.[9]

The coastal habitats of VIP including mangrove forests, coral reefs, and seagrasses provide ecological and socioeconomic services to the people and to the environment and these are important food sources to them. A report from the 2020 Philippine Forestry Statistics of the DENR–Forest Management Bureau (FMB) has shown that there are approximately 9,921 ha of mangroves in the coastal provinces of VIP, with Marinduque having the largest cover of 3,006 ha.[10] Carbon sequestration potential studies have also been conducted in the mangrove forests in VIP, specifically in Sta. Cruz, Marinduque; Naujan, Oriental Mindoro; Calatagan, Batangas; Looc, Romblon, and Calapan in Oriental Mindoro. The study reported that the average carbon stock of mangroves in the selected sites were 626.79 Mg C/ha which shows a slightly higher value of the Philippine average of carbon sequestration in mangrove forests (624 Mg C/ha), highlighting the importance of protecting this ecosystem for climate change mitigation.[11] Meanwhile, 9 seagrass species have been identified in VIP and these are considered as food sources for large marine vertebrates such as turtles and dugongs.[12] These seagrasses also serve as nursery grounds for commercially-important fishes for food security. VIP houses over 400 species of coral reefs[13] that serve as shelters to diverse marine life and this ecosystem contributes largely to the tourism industry.

Despite the importance and natural diversity of VIP, it is threatened by the impacts of climate change and anthropogenic factors. Losing our precious ecosystems in VIP means losing resilience and increasing vulnerabilities from the climate crisis.

8 K. E. Carpenter and V. G. Springer, "The Center of the Center of Marine Shore Fish Biodiversity: The Philippine Islands," *Environmental Biology of Fishes* 72, no. 4 (2005): 467–480.

9 N. A. M. Rula, K. A. J. Ramos-Danile, J. A. P. Valera, J. M. H. Arcega, and J. A. Saco, "Macrophyte Diversity and Conservation Values of the Verde Island Passage, Philippine," *Philippine Journal of Science* 151, no. S1 (2021): 135–156.

10 Department of Environment and Natural Resources, *2020 Philippine Forestry Statistics*, 2020, https://forestry.denr.gov.ph/fmb_web/ph-forestry-stats/2020-philippine-forestry-statistics/.

11 S. G. Salmo III, *Mangrove Blue Carbon in the Verde Island Passage* (Conservation International Philippines, 2019), *Nature Is 30 (Climate Strategy)*.

12 N. A. M. Rula, K. A. J. Ramos-Danile, J. A. P. Valera, J. M. H. Arcega, and J. A. Saco, "Macrophyte Diversity and Conservation Values of the Verde Island Passage, Philippine," *Philippine Journal of Science* 151, no. S1 (2021): 135–156.

13 Michael A. Francisco, "A 'VIP' of Global Marine Biodiversity in the Philippines," *GMA Network*, 2019, https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/scitech/science/709564/a-lsquo-vip-rsquo-of-global-marine-biodiversity-in-the-philippines/story/.

Heavy Industry Facilities in the VIP

The VIP is also the focal point of fossil fuel infrastructure in the country, and most of it sits on the Batangas coast. The Center for Energy, Ecology, and Development's (CEED) scoping of the corridor identified 157 industrial facilities, 58 of them fossil fuel facilities: 20 grid-connected fossil power plants, 16 off-grid Small Power Utilities Group (SPUG) plants, 14 fossil fuel import terminals, five petrochemical facilities, two refineries and one storage facility. More than 80% of the identified facilities are along the Batangas coastline, around Batangas Bay and Balayan Bay.

Fossil gas is the largest part of this and the part still expanding. The scoping recorded 21 fossil gas projects along the Batangas coast: eight operating, three under construction, one in pre-construction and two announced. Another seven are no longer moving, with three cancelled and four shelved indefinitely. Coal is concentrated in Calaca in Balayan Bay, while every existing power station along Batangas Bay and the Batangas City coastline burns fossil gas. One coal project along the Batangas coast has been cancelled. Among proposed projects with a known fuel, 86.7% plan to burn fossil gas and the rest coal. Existing power plants along the Batangas coast total almost 5 GW, which would rise to more than 7.1 GW if all proposed and planned projects were completed.

Both refineries, the storage facility, all 14 fossil fuel terminals and the five petrochemical facilities identified in the scoping are in Batangas. Elsewhere in the corridor, 16 SPUG plants in Marinduque, Occidental Mindoro and Oriental Mindoro depend on imported bunker fuel or diesel, with a combined installed capacity of 91 MW.

Table 1. List of heavy industries in the VIP

Industry	Batangas	Marinduque	Occidental Mindoro	Oriental Mindoro	Romblon	Grand Total
Asphalt	1			1		2
Cement	12					12
Fossil Refinery	2					2
Fossil Storage	1					1
Fossil Terminal	14					14
Manufacturing	18					18
Mining	5		1	1		7
Petrochemicals	5					5
Port	46	2	3	2	2	55
Power	20					20
Shipyard	2					2
SPUG		5	2	9		16
Steel	3					3
Grand Total	**129**	**7**	**6**	**13**	**2**	**157**

METHODOLOGY

The data presented in this report was obtained through three main methodologies. First is online document parsing, done from January-February 2026. Table 2 presents a comprehensive list of organizations and report types where the information presented in this study were sourced. Second is community consultations with petitioners in the last three years in the towns of Pola, Pinamalayan, and Calapan. Lastly, this report made a comparison of historical and current seagrass cover in ground zero sites of the oil spill to document potential ecosystem recovery.

Table 2. List of sources and report types that were obtained through online document parsing from Jan-Feb 2026.

Organization	Report Type
LGUs and other local organizations	Incident Reports
	Oil Spill Recovery Plans
DENR-Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB)	Activity Reports
	Rapid Assessment Reports
	Damage Assessment Reports
	Valuation Reports
Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD)	Incident Reports
National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC)	Site Reports
Media	Online news articles
Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)	Online news articles
	Independent monitoring / assessment reports
	Community consultations

The initiatives documented in this report will be categorized according to the type and timeline of execution of the responses after the February 2023 oil spill incident. It will be classified as:

Rapid Response Phase: all immediate responses aimed at oil spill containment, reduction exposure to critical ecosystems, as well as provision of immediate assistance to communities directly affected by the tragedy. This will also include the establishment of information dissemination systems such real time and spill projection updates.

Rehabilitation and Recovery Phase: efforts aimed at restoring / rehabilitating ecosystem health, provision of socio-economic assistance, health and/or social support to affected communities, and continuation of ecosystem monitoring. These activities encompass long-term programs by the government or other concerned groups to restore and protect affected ecosystems and communities from similar incidents, policy and governance improvements, and long term ecological monitoring programs focused on persistent pollutants caused by the oil spill.

RAPID RESPONSE PHASE (FEBRUARY - MAY 2023)

The rapid response phase is a critical period that significantly determines the severity of the oil spill and its impact on the environment. If executed properly, it can prevent contaminants from spreading further, avoid prolonged community exposure to the toxins, reduce ecosystem recovery time, and minimize potential economic damage in communities whose livelihoods are dependent on healthy coasts. This section provides a non-exhaustive list of rapid response initiatives done by various entities in response to the 2023 Minidoro oil spill disaster.

Table 3. List of rapid rehabilitation initiatives in response to the 2023 Mindoro Oil Spill.

Organization Name	Organization Type	Response	Period of Intervention
PCG	Government Agency	Led on-water containment operations through applying chemical dispersants via the tugboat BRP Titan.[14] Oversaw the chartered DSV Fire Opal's siphoning of remaining fuel from the wreck.[15]	February - June 2023
DSWD	Government Agency	Distributed ₱10 million worth of food and non-food items and launched a 15-day cash-for-work program hiring fisherfolk to begin cleaning oil slicks as a short-term livelihood measure.[16] Distributed a total of ₱223 million of humanitarian assistance for the affected municipalities of MIMAROPA and Oriental Mindoro.[17]	As of March 2023 As of April 2023
LGUs	Government Agency	Distributed a total of ₱444,039.00 of humanitarian assistance for the affected municipalities of MIMAROPA and Oriental Mindoro.[18]	As of March 2023
DENR	Government Agency	Conducted rapid ecological assessments to assess damage to critical marine ecosystems.	From March to April 2023
NDRRMC	Government Agency	Spearheaded the coordination of multiple agencies for oil containment, clean-up, and community assistance.	
Caritas Philippines	Civic Group	Provided relief packs to the most heavily affected communities in Oriental Mindoro.[19]	March 2023
MSI	Academe	Created oil slick projection models to assist oil spill containment efforts.	March 2023
Metro Pacific Investments Foundation Inc.	Corporate Foundation	Donated medical supplies, protective gears to the Philippine Coast Guard to support clean-up operations as well as relief goods to affected communities in Oriental Mindoro.[20]	April 2023
Malampaya Foundation Inc.	Corporate Foundation	Donated oil containment equipment such as spill booms and protective gears to the municipality of Pola; provided logistical support and basic assistance to Bantay Dagat volunteers as well as fisherfolk in heavily affected areas.[21]	March 2023
Japan International Cooperation Agency	Foreign agency	Donated equipment needed for oil spill cleanup and containment.[22]	March 2023

14 Philippine News Agency, "Sunken tanker in Or. Mindoro leaks industrial oil: PCG," March 02, 2023, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1196508.

15 Martin Sadongdong, "PCG: At Least 125 Liters of 'Black' Oil Siphoned from MT Princess Empress," *Manila Bulletin*, June 2, 2023, 10:03 a.m., https://mb.com.ph/2023/6/2/pcg-at-least-125-liters-of-black-oil-siphoned-from-mt-princess-empress.

16 Lorenz Pasion, "DSWD Unveils Cash-for-Work Program for Oriental Mindoro Oil Spill Cleaners," *Rappler*, March 4, 2023, 9:05 p.m.,https://www.rappler.com/philippines/luzon/dswd-unveils-cash-for-work-program-oriental-mindoro-oil-spill-cleaners/.

17 Department of Social Welfare and Development, "PBBM, Secretary Rex Extend Cash Aid to Oil Spill-Affected Families in Pola, Oriental Mindoro," April 15, 2023, https://old.dswd.gov.ph/pbbm-secretary-rex-extend-cash-aid-to-oil-spill-affected-families-in-pola-oriental-mindoro/.

18 Ibid

19 Philippine News Agency, "CBCP to Send Aid to 250 Families Affected by Mindoro Oil Spill," March 9, 2023, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1196985.

20 MPIF Foundation, "MPIF Provides Aid to Coast Guards and Families in Oriental Mindoro Oil Spill," April 5, 2023, https://mpifoundation.ph/news/mpif-provides-aid-to-coast-guards-and-families-in-oriental-mindoro-oil-spill/?.

21 Malampaya Foundation, "Registered Fisherfolks of Oil Spill Site Naujan Given Food Aid," April 20, 2023, https://www.malampayafoundation.org/news/registered-fisherfolks-of-oil-spill-site-naujan-given-food-aid.

22 GMA News, "Japan Donates Gear, Equipment to the Philippines for Oriental Mindoro Oil Spill Cleanup," March 13, 2023, 4:15 p.m., https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/863691/japan-donates-gear-equipment-to-the-philippines-for-oriental-mindoro-oil-spill-cleanup/story/.

The rapid response initiatives of the government came under scrutiny due to delays in oil containment efforts, especially during the first few critical days after the spill. The unavailability of containment equipment such as oil spill booms and skimmers were major causes of delay. Containment equipment were reported to have arrived only on the sixth day of the spill which has allowed the slick to travel further to neighboring provinces of Batangas, Antique, and Palawan.[23] Although civic involvement played a critical role in filling in most of the response gaps, they may still be considered insufficient in the face of an ecological disaster of this magnitude.

The incident also exposed critical gaps in the technical capacity of government frontline agencies to respond to oil spill disasters. Mobilization during the first few days of the spill was slow and uncoordinated. As late as March 11, two weeks after the sinking, PCG was still classifying the spill as a Tier 2 under the NOSCP, one that could be managed by existing resources, even as Japan already sent a technical team to assist and the U.S. Coast Guard offered a remotely operated vehicle (ROV) that could drain the remaining fuel in the tanker.[24] The response was not elevated to Tier 3, the NOSCP's highest level reserved for spills requiring substantial national and international resources, until March 25, nearly a month after the sinking.[25] By that point, PCG's own tally showed 10,613 liters of oily water and 123 sacks of oil-contaminated material recovered offshore, alongside roughly 3,644.5 sacks and 22 drums of shoreline waste, across 55.5 km of affected coastline in Oriental Mindoro, Antique, and Palawan while DENR estimated the wreck was still leaking 35,000 to 50,000 liters of oil per day.[26]

A study by CEED also highlighted the insufficiency of compensation given to affected communities, noting how the amount fell short of the actual losses that were experienced on the ground which included declining tourism activities, fishing bans and other related socio-economic disruptions.

23 Bella Cariaso, "Mindoro Oil Spill: Mayors to Consolidate Raps vs. Vessel Owner," *The Philippine Star*, March 12, 2023, https://www.philstar.com/nation/2023/03/12/2251015/mindoro-oil-spill-mayors-consolidate-raps-vs-vessel-owner-.

24 Robertzon Ramirez and Ghio Ong, "PCG Seeking US Help in Oil Spill Cleanup," *The Philippine Star*, March 12, 2023,https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/03/12/2250999/pcg-seeking-us-help-oil-spill-cleanup-/amp/.

25 Lorenz Pasion, "How the Philippines Responds to Oil Spills," *Rappler*, August 2, 2024, 5:20 p.m., https://www.rappler.com/environment/oil-spill-response-philippines/.

26 Daniza Fernandez, "Over 9,000 Liters of Oily Water Collected from Oriental Mindoro Oil Spill – Coast Guard," *INQUIRER.net*, March 27, 2023, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1748621/fwd-over-9000-liters-of-oily-water-mixture-collected-after-massive-oil-spill.

REHABILITATION AND RECOVERY INVENTORY

Initiatives that are listed under the Rehabilitation and Recovery Phase cover longer-term programs designed to restore environmental and economic function back to its pre-spill conditions or to at least bring it to a stable state. This phase will also cover programs that focus on resiliency-building for all communities and ecosystem types affected by the spill.

The focus of the recovery initiatives were categorized into four types: (1) socio-economic interventions such as sustainable livelihood options and assistance, (2) environmental interventions such as long-term monitoring programs to include the monitoring of persistent petroleum pollutants and ecosystem recovery, (3) policy interventions, and (4) community well being, which includes interventions that promote social justice and just compensation (Table 4).

Table 4. List of projects tagged as recovery initiatives in response to the 2023 Mindoro Oil Spill.

Organization	Activity	Program Focus			
		Socio-economic	Environment	Policy	Community well- being
BFAR	Provided ₱4,000.000.00 worth of livelihood assistance for fisherfolk affected by the fishing ban. Assistance included smokehouses and raw materials for fish processing.	✓			
BFAR	Provided ₱20,000 zero interest loans to 260 fisherfolk through its Sure Assistance and Recovery Program.[27]	✓			
PCG	Conducted containment operations and surveillance to assess the extent of the spill.	✓			
Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE)	Distributed ₱10.3 million to 391 beneficiaries under Integrated Livelihood Program (DILP).	✓			
Department of Trade and Industry (DTI)	Distributed livelihood kits worth ₱10,000 per beneficiary under the Pangkabuhayan sa Pagbangon at Ginhawa (PPG) Program.	✓			
CEED	Spearheaded the filing of a just compensation case.	✓			✓
Technical Education Skills and Development Authority (TESDA)	Trained a total of 2,900 residents in Oriental Mindoro on programs ranging from Oil Spill Response Training; Meat and Fish Processing; Bread Making; Hog Raising; Dressmaking; Service Motorcycle Small Engine System; Small Engine Repair; Pastry Making; and Sugar Concentration.[28]	✓			
Department of Tourism (DOT)	Provided livelihood training programs through its "Bayanihan sa Bukas na may Pag-asa sa Turismo" (BBMT) Program to over 1,000 tourism workers belonging to 29 community-based sustainable tourism organizations across29 community-based sustainable tourism organizations across Oriental Mindoro[29]	✓			
IOPC fund	As of December 2024, 32,000 claims have been settled. Overall, the total amount disbursed so far is ₱2.702 billion to oil spill affected claimants in Oriental Mindoro.[30]	✓			✓

27 Gene Ace Sapit, "Mindoro Fisherfolks Affected by Oil Spill Receive Financial Aid," *Philippine Information Agency*, January 29, 2024, https://pia.gov.ph/news/mindoro-fisherfolks-affected-by-oil-spill-receive-financial-aid.

28 Technical Education and Skills Development Authority, "TESDA Eyes Upskilling 2K+ Mindoro Fisherfolks Affected by Oil Spill," April 11, 2023, https://www.tesda.gov.ph/Media/NewsDetail/20241.

29 Philippine News Agency, "Mindoro Ready to Welcome Tourists Back after Oil Spill Crisis," October 23, 2023, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1212354.

30 Ace Sapit, "Over ₱2.7-B Oil Spill Claims in Oriental Mindoro Given to Claimants," *Philippine Information Agency*, November 7, 2025, https://pia.gov.ph/news/over-%E2%82%B12-7-b-oil-spill-claims-in-oriental-mindoro-given-to-claimants

An examination of the recovery programs reveal a disproportionate focus on socio-economic projects and a clear lack of initiatives geared towards long-term environmental monitoring and recovery. For instance, the latest site assessment report released by DENR was dated January 2024. After which, no publicly available updates were made thereafter. There are several non-government groups who have done independent ecological assessments, but these efforts are highly localized and fragmented, focusing only in the towns of Pola and Naujan. At present, there seems to be no coordinated, marine corridor-wide assessment to determine the current status of all affected ecosystems in the VIP post oil spill.

Despite the absence of visible oil slicks in the waters of Mindoro, persistent organic pollutants such as PAH may still be present. Currently, no publicly published PAH data related to the oil spill can be found apart from the initial assessments done by BFAR via their oil spill bulletins spanning from March to May 2023.[31] PAHs can remain in the sediment and biota for years following an oil spill, hence, can still be considered as a real but unrecognized public health concern, especially in the most severely affected areas. Hence, long term monitoring should also be a priority to monitor potential chronic exposure to such toxic pollutants.

In addition to the absence of programs focusing on environmental recovery, the data also shows a lack of initiatives to address regulatory gaps that might have contributed to the disaster, exacerbated its impacts, or resulted in delayed disaster response. Current policies such as the Clean Water Act and the Marine Pollution Decree (Presidential Decree No. 979) are not exactly designed to prevent oil spill disasters from happening. They do not impose navigational restrictions, nor heightened regulations for vessels that are travelling in ecologically sensitive areas such as the VIP.

31 Department of Agriculture–Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, “Oriental Mindoro Oil Spill Bulletin No. 05, Series of 2023,” May 23, 2023, https://www.bfar.da.gov.ph/2023/05/23/oriental-mindoro-oil-spill-bulletin-no-05-series-of-2023

ASSESSMENT OF RECOVERY

Status of water quality

CEED's February 2026 independent testing of six MPAs in Pola (Misong, Puting Cacao, Tiguihan, Tagumpay) and two in Pinamalayan (Banilad, Ranzo) found that all six still exceeded the 1 mg/L oil-and-grease limit for Class SA protected waters, three years after the spill. Similar results were obtained during a series of water quality tests in 2023 and 2024 where five out of six and six out of six MPAs failed the oil and grease test, respectively. Although it is unlikely that the oil and grease detected in the sampled areas are remnants of the 2023 oil spill, consistent positive results reveal the vulnerability of VIP coastal ecosystems to exposure to hazardous industrial pollutants, spanning decades of fossil fuel operations in the marine corridor.

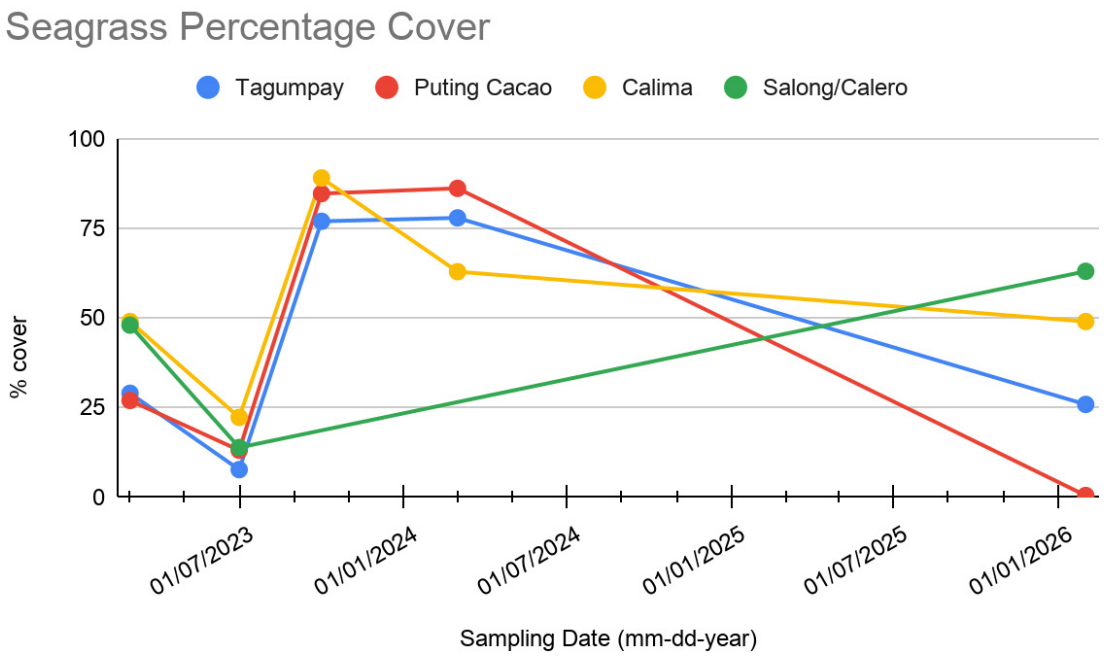
Table 5. Results of February 2026 water quality testing in Pinamalayan and Pola, Oriental Mindoro.

Town	Name of MPA	Mean Value of Oil and Grease (mg/L)	Status for Water Quality Guidelines
Pinamalayan	Ranzo Fish Sanctuary, Ranzo	<2.0	Fail
	Banilad Simborio Fish Sanctuary, Banilad	2.33	Fail
Pola	Song of the Sea, Misong	2.0	Fail
	St. Peter the Rock Fish Sanctuary, Tagumpay	2.67	Fail
	King Fisheries Reserve, Tiguihan	<2.0	Fail
	St. John the Baptist Fish Sanctuary, Puting Cacao	3.0	Fail

Long-Term Monitoring of Ground Zero Sites

This section presents one of the few medium term assessments on seagrass cover in the oil spill ground zero sites in Oriental Mindoro. Albeit localized, data collection done in these areas span a total of four years (March 2023 to February 2026) and provided a general picture of seagrass loss and recovery in one of the most heavily affected ecosystems of the 2023 Mindoro Oil Spill. Mindoro State University's Center for Environmental Studies conducted the most recent seagrass assessment in February 2026 across four barangays sites in Tagumpay, Puting Cacao, Calima, and Salong/Calero. The data trace a common early trajectory across all four sites: average percent cover fell sharply between March and July 2023, the period immediately following the spill before rebounding by October 2023 and holding through March 2024, with sites reaching 63–89% cover at their peak. Read on its own, this two-year window would support a narrative of ecosystem recovery.

Figure 2. Average percentage of seagrass cover assessed from 2023-2026.



The February 2026 assessment has revealed a significant decline in seagrass cover, particularly in Barangays Tagumay and Puting Cacao. Seagrass cover in Tagumpay declined to 26% (a 67% decline from its peak), Calima to 49% (a 45% decline, back to its original March 2023 baseline), and Puting Cacao to 0.5% cover, a 99% decline from its March 2024 peak and the most significant decrease in cover recorded at any site. Only Salong/Calero showed net improvement over the full period (48% to 63%), though two of its five survey rounds (October 2023, March 2024) are missing, leaving its trajectory less complete than the other three.

The potential causes of such decline could not be captured by the assessment but it is noteworthy that two of the four seagrass monitoring sites are the same sites identified to have exceeded the acceptable oil and grease thresholds during the February 2026 water quality testing. Puting Cacao, the site whose seagrass cover collapsed to 0.5% by February 2026, recorded the highest oil and grease concentration of any MPA sampled that same period (3.0 mg/L at St. John the Baptist Fish Sanctuary). Tagumpay, whose seagrass cover fell 67% from its 2024 peak, corresponds to the second-highest reading (2.67 mg/L at St. Peter the Rock). The other two seagrass sites, Calima and Salong/Calero, do not appear among the MPAs sampled for water quality, so no comparable checking is available for these sites.

The loss is significant beyond the monitored sites as seagrass does more than feed marine creatures in the VIP. Seagrass beds are nursery and feeding grounds for commercially important fishes and invertebrates.[32] A meadow reduced to 26% cover at Tagumpay or 0.5% at Puting Cacao is a loss of habitat that municipal fisherfolk depend on. Representatives of the fisherfolk say their catches are already down from before the spill.

32 Lina Mtwana Nordlund et al., "Seagrass Ecosystem Services—What's Next?," *Marine Pollution Bulletin* 134 (2018): 145–151, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpolbul.2017.09.014.

The beds also hold sediment and slow water flow, keeping water clear over adjacent reefs.[33] Corals and seagrasses need light and turbidity reduces the amount of light available to both. Seagrass sediments store carbon and the loss of cover can release some of this store, weakening the VIP's role as a carbon sink.[34] Seagrass and seaweed are also used directly as food and as a base for livelihood by coastal households.

Taken together, the dataset does not support a simple recovery timeline for seagrass in the affected MPAs. It instead shows an initial disturbance-and-rebound pattern that, at three of four monitored sites, did not hold to the three-year mark, a pattern consistent with this report's broader finding that no coordinated, corridor-wide ecological monitoring has tracked whether early recovery gains have been sustained. It also shows that, at present, seagrass ecosystems in the sampled sites are exposed to other threats that are clearly causing significant decline to the already vulnerable population.

Compensation for fisherfolk

Three years after the spill, compensation for affected fisherfolk is still in dispute and by most accounts inadequate. Certain fisherfolk have been compensated by the IOPC Funds. In February 2025, Governor Hurmelito "Bonz" Dolor announced that almost 30,000 claimants had been paid, with the highest payout at ₱700,000,[35] but fisherfolk leader Aldrin Villanueva challenged this as he had received only ₱62,000 over two disbursements, an amount he considered grossly insufficient compared to more than months without income during the fishing ban, and much of what fisherfolk received went straight to paying off debt rather than rebuilding their livelihoods.[36]

It was the inadequate compensation, along with three unanswered demand letters sent to the companies responsible in 2024 and early 2025, that pushed the fight to court. On December 9, 2025, fisherfolk from Pola, Calapan and Pinamalayan, represented by Villanueva, Fr. Edwin Gariguez, the Executive Director of the Diocesan Social Action Center-Diocese of Calapan, Naujan native Ka Leody De Guzman, and CEED, filed a class action lawsuit before the Regional Trial Court of Pinamalayan against the shipowner (RDC Reield Marine Services), the charterer (SL Harbor Bulk Terminal Corporation, an SMC subsidiary), the insurer (The Shipowners' Club), and the IOPC Funds itself.

The case is anchored on two grounds: (1) strict liability under RA 9483 (the Oil Pollution Compensation Act) where negligence need not be proved against the shipowner, insurer and IOPC Funds; and (2) an environmental tort claim under Article 2176 of the Civil Code where it is alleged that RDC operated an unregistered, unseaworthy vessel and that SL Harbor failed in its own duty of care in chartering the vessel. The petitioners requested more than just awarding money to make up for the damage done but to order the rehabilitation of the affected coastal communities and to fund efforts to restore what the spill damaged.

In short, this case exists because of IOPC payouts, the compensation mechanism that was supposed to work has been slow, partial and time-limited, while the underlying damage to livelihoods and to the VIP itself has lasted beyond it.

33 Pamela L. Reynolds, "Seagrass and Seagrass Beds," *Smithsonian Ocean*, Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, accessed October 5, 2026, https://ocean.si.edu/ocean-life/plants-algae/seagrass-and-seagrass-beds.

34 Vasilis Dakos et al., "Carbon Storage of Seagrass Ecosystems May Experience Tipping Points in Response to Anthropogenic Stress—A Modeling Perspective," *Frontiers in Complex Systems* 3 (2025): 1534330, https://doi.org/10.3389/fcpxs.2025.1534330.

35 Dennis Datu, "30,000 Fisherfolks Compensated, 2 Years after Oil Spill Disaster in Oriental Mindoro," *ABS-CBN News*, February 23, 2025, https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/regions/2025/2/23/30-000-fisherfolks-compensated-2-years-after-oil-spill-in-oriental-mindoro-1722

36 Teleradyo Serbisyo, "Some Fishers Still Uncompensated for Oriental Mindoro Oil Spill," YouTube, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0kn3bhNDx0&t=225s

GAP ANALYSIS

Areas where rehabilitation efforts are insufficient or absent

Recovery funding and programming has followed the easiest path to fund and report on, with direct cash transfers and livelihood training, with clear beneficiary counts, while ecological monitoring has been left to whichever actor has the mandate and capacity to pick it up, since it is harder to itemize in a single agency's annual report. More than the neglect of any one agency, it is this structural bias that has prevented the corridor-wide assessment identified in this report from being done three years in a row.

The same is true of the gaps in ecological/pollution assessment (e.g. PAH, wider-scale and longer-term monitoring) and regulatory gaps identified in the previous section. The persistence of PAH was already flagged in DENR's own early bulletins, and the push for VIP to be included in the ENIPAS Act, or at least a stronger hazardous-cargo shipping framework, predates this spill. What is missing is a forcing mechanism such as a legal deadline, a standing budget line or an assigned agency that would translate an already-acknowledged risk into a funded, monitored program, not leave it to be rediscovered every time a report like this one is written.

Institutional blocks

The Senate and House hearings on the tanker's clearance exposed an accountability structure where no single agency can be blamed, and where the agencies couldn't even agree with each other. At the March 14, 2023 Senate hearing, MARINA testified the tanker had no valid CPC amendment and had already sailed nine times on that lapsed authority.[37] PCG admitted it never boarded the vessel for inspection. Days later, PCG did a 180, confirming the vessel did have a permit, contradicting MARINA outright.[38] By the May 9th House hearing, PCG's story had shifted again, now citing documents from the shipowner's agent, which MARINA denied issuing, with the undocumented sail count by then at seventeen to nineteen trips. NBI added a third contradiction, finding the vessel was misrepresented entirely, sold out of Navotas, not newly built in Bataan. More than a communication failure, this is evidence that the pre-departure clearance process has no single agency accountable for it and no mechanism forcing agencies to reconcile their story from one hearing to the next.

There is a limit to the compensation framework that is easy to overlook. The Department of Justice (DOJ) said the tanker's 200-ton net tonnage meant the case only qualified for the second of three possible tiers of compensation under applicable international rules, limiting the total compensation pool well below the scale of damage actually caused. Relief distribution has also come under fire, with reports that food packs distributed to affected communities were inedible, prompting the House committee to turn over samples to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for testing.[39] The claims process itself was cumbersome, as claimants had to travel to Calapan to file, waited three to six months for payout, and had to sign a quitclaim waiving future claims.

Again, the Philippines does not have a dedicated institution such as a spill-specific trustee council for funding and coordination of long-term monitoring. Instead, funding for recovery has been through general-purpose agency programs that are not designed around ecological restoration, and compensation has relied heavily on the international IOPC Funds mechanism rather than a domestic counterpart.

37 Xave Gregorio, "Marina: Tanker in Oriental Mindoro Oil Spill Had No Permit," *Philstar.com*, March 14, 2023, https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/03/14/2251636/marina-tanker-oriental-mindoro-oil-spill-had-no-permit

38 *Malaya*, "PCG: Sunken Vessel Had Permit to Operate," March 16, 2023. https://malaya.com.ph/news/pcg-sunken-vessel-had-permit-to-operate/

39 GMA Integrated News, "DSWD Orders Recall of Canned Goods Given to Mindoro Oil Spill-Affected Residents," *GMA News Online*, May 8, 2023, https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/869279/dswd-orders-recall-of-canned-goods-given-to-mindoro-oil-spill-affected-residents/story/

Best practices from other oil spill disasters

Guimaras is not so much a historical comparison as a preview of what the VIP is living through right now. Both spills had the same optimistic timeline, a political promise to finish the cleanup within months, and in both cases the actual timeline ran to years. It took DENR Region 6 over five years to declare Guimaras bunker-oil-free.[40] The lesson Guimaras should have taught is that heavy industrial and bunker fuels persist, and that recovery timelines should be set from evidence rather than political messaging. The same mismatch between promised and actual recovery time has simply been repeated at a larger scale.

Unmet needs in affected communities

CEED's own field survey of residents across Pola, Pinamalayan, Naujan and Calapan from the start of the spill to six months after showed that within two months of the spill, residents were already reporting new or worsening respiratory, cardiovascular, digestive and skin conditions, with medical costs for cases that needed tests or hospitalization at ₱120 to ₱53,000. The losses though were not just to the fisherfolk but also to the boatmen, fish vendors, owners of resorts and other workers who relied on tourism. Residents recounted how they fashioned their own spill booms out of bottles and husks and manually scooped out the oil residue, putting themselves at further risk in the process. Representatives for fisherfolk said catch volumes were still down from pre-spill levels as of the December 2025 class action lawsuit, and that the compensation received so far had mostly been used to pay off spill-related debt rather than restore lost income. Three demand letters sent to the responsible companies between 2024 and 2025 went unanswered before litigation was filed.

40 Wenna Berondo, "Guimaras Seas Now Fit for Fishing, Swimming," *Philstar.com*, January 1, 2012, https://www.philstar.com/region/2012/01/01/763470/guimaras-seas-now-fit-fishing-swimming

RECOMMENDATIONS

Priority interventions for rehabilitation

- Establish a centralized, marine corridor-wide environmental monitoring system for the VIP, replacing the fragmented, limited coverage documented in this report, with recurring rather than one-off sampling across all affected MPAs, and use the results to pursue the designation of waters exceeding guidelines as non-attainment areas under Clean Water Act and of the VIP as water quality management area with corresponding action plan.
- Prioritize sustained monitoring of persistent and toxic pollutants, including PAHs, in directly impacted areas. Current public data stops at BFAR's 2023 bulletins, despite this report's own three-year water quality findings showing an unbroken run of Class SA failures (Table 5).
- Commission a corridor-wide seagrass and coral reef status update building on Mindoro State University's longitudinal monitoring, given this report's finding that early recovery gains at three of four monitored sites had reversed by the three-year mark.

Policy reforms

- Push for a comprehensive law protecting the VIP from future oil spill disasters, including its designation under the ENIPAS Act.
- Strengthen navigational and cargo regulations for hazardous shipments transiting the VIP. Current laws such as the Clean Water Act and the Marine Pollution Decree do not impose navigational restrictions or heightened requirements on vessels carrying hazardous cargo through ecologically sensitive waters.

Community-centered approaches for sustained recovery

- Conduct an updated, three-year community needs reassessment. All current health and livelihood data comes from 2023 and no comparable reassessment has been done since, leaving the present-day scale of unmet need undocumented.
- Simplify and localize the compensation claims process. The requirement to travel to Calapan, the three-to-six-month wait, and the quitclaim requirement, which this report's Gap Analysis identifies as a structural barrier, should be revisited to better match affected households' capacity and timeline.

Accountability and monitoring mechanisms

- Establish a clear governance structure, a decision tree or organizational chart, assigning defined roles and responsibilities among agencies for handling oil spill disasters in the VIP, addressing the coordination failures this report documents in both the Rapid Response and Gap Analysis sections.
- Support the ongoing push for just compensation through the December 2025 class suit, including its aim of securing court-ordered rehabilitation funding rather than damages alone.
- Pursue accountability not only against the shipowner, RDC Reield Marine Services, but also against SL Harbor Bulk Terminal Corporation, the charterer and owner of the spilled cargo, and its parent company, San Miguel Corporation (via San Miguel Shipping and Lighterage Corporation), and to public officials who were negligent in their performance of duties or who intentionally committed violations or illegal acts. The class suit already names SL Harbor as a defendant, but public and media attention has concentrated almost entirely on RDC Reield as the vessel operator. This report recommends that scrutiny, and any resulting accountability measures, financial or regulatory, extend equally to the corporation that owned and chartered the fuel being transported, since the Article 2176 Civil Code claim in the pending case rests partly on SL Harbor's own alleged failure of duty of care in chartering an unseaworthy vessel.

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