

International group starts process for \$203M compensation for Tobago oil spill

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The International Oil Pollution Compensation (IOPC) Fund has estimated the payout for the Gulfstream oil spill at £4.2 million, or \$203 million.

The fund confirmed that compensation payments have begun, but the process is expected to continue until 2027.

A report published last week ahead of the IOPC's November governing body meeting in London showed that while £10 million has been raised in a special Gulfstream Major Claims Fund, just over £1 million had been paid out as of June 30, 2025. The fund projects that an additional £21.5 million will be paid between July 2025 and March 2027.

In a separate update on September 12, the IOPC confirmed that its Claims Manager, Mark Homan, visited Trinidad and Tobago earlier this month.

He met with officials from the Ministry of Energy and the Tobago House of Assembly and toured affected areas. According to the IOPC, discussions focused on the sale of oil recovered from the Gulfstream barge and the disposal of waste collected during the cleanup. The fund said the waste remains stored in three specially dug pits at the Studley Park dump, and no timeline has yet been set for its final removal.

The Gulfstream overturned off Cove on February 7, 2024, spilling thousands of barrels of bunker fuel oil that polluted Tobago's coastline and beaches. The tug Solo Creed, which had been towing the barge, was detained by Angolan authorities in May 2024 and later formally arrested by a court in October. However, according to IOPC records, by the time its governing bodies met in London the following month, the vessel had "escaped arrest" and had not been located since.

In May this year, the IOPC confirmed that the government had hired a company to carry out satellite surveillance in an effort to track the tug.

As of August 29, the vessel had not been detected.

Energy Minister Dr Roodal Moonilal said the Government remains committed to finding the tug and its owner to pursue Tobago's multimillion-dollar damage claim. "Through the maritime services division, we are collaborating to locate the vessel using relevant technology and an expert agency. The ownership of that vessel has not been confirmed, and it is under active investigation at this time," he told Guardian Media earlier this month. He added that T&T will continue to pursue its \$244 million claim once the vessel is found and its owner identified.

The Gulfstream barge itself was removed from the Cove site and taken to Sea Lots, Trinidad, where, according to the IOCP, it was broken up and sold for scrap in March this year.

By April this year, the IOPC reported that 290 claims worth US\$30.3 million had been submitted.

These included fisheries claims from Tobago, claims for cleanup operations, and claims from Bonaire for aerial surveillance and beach cleaning.

At that time, it said further claims were expected, including for tourism losses.

The Tobago House of Assembly has reported spending more than \$72.1 million on the oil spill cleanup, already exceeding the \$50 million originally allocated by the Central Government in 2024. The IOPC, in its April 2024 incident report, had earlier cited a higher figure of about \$85 million (US\$12.5 million), which reflected the THA's initial claims submitted in the immediate aftermath of the spill.

The IOPC has promised to provide a full update on the Gulfstream matter when its governing bodies meet in London this November.