

Shipping company cleaning up Durban cargo spill

By [Fred Kockott](#)

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According to a statement released in Geneva on Friday by Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC), specialised boats and machinery are trying to extract the vast quantities of 'nurdles' (raw plastic pellets) floating in the Durban harbour following a [cargo spill](#) by container ship MSC Susanna in October.



A shipping container lies submerged in Durban harbour after the October 10 storm. Photo: Salt Fishing South Africa

Teams of workers have been deployed along a 200km stretch of the KwaZulu-Natal coastline to “painstakingly sieve the sand by hand in search of nurdles” that have been washing up on beaches over the past two weeks.

According to the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA), two 40-foot containers fell off the vessel into port waters during a severe storm which wreaked havoc in Durban on 10 October.

“They each contained 990 bags of low and high density polyethylene (plastic pellets) packed in 25kg bags. The total tonnage lost is estimated to be 49 tonnes,” said DEA spokesman Zolile Nqayi.

The containers, were subsequently located on the seabed and retrieved, said Nqayi, but by then the bags had already leaked millions of nurdles that are now polluting the East Coast.

Nqayi said the plastic pellets in their raw stage are not toxic, but once released into the marine environment they attract

harmful substances (pathogens) that can have negative impacts on marine species including seabirds and turtles which mistake the pellets for food.

In its statement, MSC said that although the spill was “undisputedly due to a natural phenomenon of extraordinary magnitude for which MSC is not at fault, MSC has taken over the clean-up of the harbour in recent days in order to expedite the process”.

“As a global marine company we have deep knowledge of how to tackle such situations and we have strong relationships with experts in the field,” said MSC’s global public relations manager, Giles Broom.

Broom said the MSC was grateful to the members of the public who acted as first responders and helped with the initial stages of the clean-up, before the owner of the cargo of plastic pellets, the Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (Sabic) appointed a specialist company, Drizit Environmental, to clean 200km of beaches.

“For its part, MSC also moved swiftly to engage an experienced global salvage and emergency response company, Resolve Marine Group, led by industry-leading expert Nick Sloane,” said Broom.

But the response [was not clearly quick enough](#) to contain the pollution, resulting in widespread public outcry about beaches now spoiled with plastic pellets.

Broom said MSC did not expect South African taxpayers to foot the bill for the clean-up. “MSC also continues to cooperate with Transnet National Ports Authority and all the parties involved in the clean-up are in daily contact,” said Broom.

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