

Fish losses heading for law courts

By AMY WILLIAMS

KIMBERLEY commercial fishing companies have initiated what promises to be a long legal battle with oil giant PTTEP over its spill last year.

The Kimberley Professional Fishing Association said the massive oil leak from PTTEP Australasia's West Atlas rig and Montara wellhead caused great inconvenience to its members.

For more than 70 days between August and November, the two who operated out of Broome, two out of Darwin and another based in the Pilbara, could not fish in the area which is part of the North West Coast, also known as the northern demersal fishery.

KPFA president Bob Masters said the association was asking PTTEP to admit their responsibility and liability for any present or current damage.

Mr Masters said apart from what they heard in the media, fishing companies had inadequate communication from PTTEP and government agencies about the disaster as it unfolded.

"It was a matter of weeks before there was a formal train of information - but it was right in the middle of our fishery, so we were directly

impacted," he said.

Skipper of the Sea Pearl 3 and part owner in Kimberley Clearwater Fisheries, George Hamilton, was fishing 48.2km away from the spill, but saw the slick and its effects on wildlife such as sea turtles.

"We were fortunate our fish were not affected, but at the time we were bringing on good fish and had to move, so it was a great inconvenience," he said.

Clearwater generally targets tropical reef fish, and regularly fishes to the north in the dry season, but closer to Broome in the cyclone season.

"We will be back up there in June-July, and I'm hoping there are no long-term effects but who knows," he said.

"The oil spill happened at spawning time, when fish and coral spawn floats on the surface of the water, and it would be up to seven years before those fish are catching size, so we won't know for a while."

PTTEP spokesperson Errol Considine said the KPFA had informed PTTEP of its intentions. Any future legal actions were likely to be slow-moving.

"It may be some time before evidence of the impact is found, until scientific environmental studies are done and released, and other inquiries are concluded," he said.