

Fears of Oil Spills as ExxonMobil Seeks to Drill at the Mouth of a Brazil River

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The waters are choppy at the point where the São Francisco River meets the Atlantic Ocean, but Jailton Souza, a fisherman since he was a boy, calmly guides the boat along. He’s used to taking tourists to the river’s mouth, which marks the border between the eastern Brazilian states of Sergipe and Alagoas.

Meandering 2,830 kilometers (1,760 miles), the São Francisco is the longest river that runs entirely through Brazil. And its mouth is a spot of extreme beauty — a dazzle of mangrove forests and white sandy beaches where turtles lay their eggs — but one where, increasingly, signs of degradation are evident. “The seawater killed off the coconut palm groves and the rice plantations,” Jailton says, pointing.



The impacts of oil exploration on the São Francisco River are already being felt by fishermen like Jailton Souza. Image by Ailton Rocha da Cruz/Agência Pública.

Velho Chico, or Old Francis, as the river is known by the locals, can no longer contain the sea's advance inland. The strength of the river's flow has declined in recent years, the result of hydroelectric dams being built upstream and the diversion of large volumes of water to supply communities affected by extreme drought.

The most recent threat comes from oil and gas exploration in the area surrounding the river's mouth. U.S. oil giant ExxonMobil has plans to drill 11 oil wells in the area immediately surrounding the estuary, in the Sergipe-Alagoas Basin.

The [area](#) that would be affected directly and indirectly by Project SEAL, as it's known, is vast, stretching some 2,000 km (1,240 mi) from Alagoas south through the states of Sergipe, Bahia, Espírito Santo, to Rio de Janeiro. In the event of an oil spill, at least 52 conservation areas would be directly affected, including the Costa dos Corais Environmental Protection Area, one of seven areas considered crucial for the protection of Brazil's coral reefs.

ExxonMobil is still awaiting an environmental license from IBAMA, the Brazilian environmental regulator, before it can start drilling. However, the company has already started to train local communities on how to deal with possible oil spills.

Local fishers told Agência Pública how the company had paid daily fees of up to 2,500 reais (\$480) per boat to teach them things such as how to contain an underwater oil spill. Agência Pública's reporters traveled more than 400 km (250 mi) by land and sea through Alagoas and Sergipe to visit the communities that would be most affected but that continue to be excluded from discussions surrounding the project.

IBAMA [told news site InfoSãoFrancisco](#) that it had not authorized the training sessions on how to deal with oil spills. The agency didn't respond to Agência Pública's request for comment on whether carrying out such training is a necessary stage in the licensing process. ExxonMobil's history of environmental disasters includes one of the biggest oil spills in history, the 1989 episode known as the "black tide," when one of the company's tankers, the Exxon Valdez, spilled 37,000 metric tons of oil in Alaska.

For its Project SEAL, training activities have reportedly already taken place in at least four municipalities across Alagoas — Piaçabuçu, Coruripe, Jequiá da Praia, and Barra de São Miguel — as well as in the village of Saramém in Sergipe. The training sessions in each place usually lasted around 10 days, and were often announced and publicized by the local councils. [In a statement, the Piaçabuçu municipal authorities](#) told local residents about the installation of a structure, next to the town hall, that would be used for "practical training for the protection of the coast."

For Divaneide Sousa, a coordinator from the civil society group Articulação do São Francisco, the local authorities are being co-opted by the oil giant. "They have an eye on the royalties from the oil," she said.

The training sessions were jointly run by U.S. emergency management consultancy Witt O'Brien's and Brazilian company OceanPact, which specializes in contingency plans for the oil industry and in environmental disaster response efforts. The two companies teamed up

in a joint venture in 2011.

Witt O'Brien's also signed off on the impact assessment for ExxonMobil's project in the São Francisco estuary. In October 2019, the company was subject to a number of [search and seizure warrants](#) after being named as a "qualified individual" in the investigation into the Greek oil tanker Bouboulina, belonging to Delta Tankers Ltd., which was identified as being responsible for an oil spill along the Brazilian coast between 2019 and 2020.

At the time, nearly 5,000 metric tons of oil were removed from [more than 1,000 sites across 11 states in Brazil](#), nine of them in the country's northeast. Some 3,000 km (1,900 mi) of coastline were [contaminated by oil](#), in what was the biggest environmental crime in Brazil's history in terms of the total area affected.

The [Federal Police only concluded their investigation into the disaster in December last year, in which it named a Greek oil tanker as the ship responsible for the spill](#), but stopped short of confirming whether it was the Bouboulina. They also didn't disclose the name of the company at fault, or clarify whether Witt O'Brien's had any links to the vessel.



Pools of oil on a beach show the extent of the 2019 spill along Brazil's northeast coastline. Image by Brenda Alcântara/Agência Pública.

'The end for the river'

In the event of an oil spill from ExxonMobil's Project SEAL, the company's own studies show that the town of Piaçabuçu would be one of the first places to be hit by such a disaster. The beach of Pontal do Peba, close to the town, is the last strip of sand at the point where the São Francisco River flows into the sea. Piaçabuçu, with just over 19,000 inhabitants, was once an important point of rice cultivation. But the increasing saltwater intrusion into the water table, caused by the weakening of the river's flow, has effectively ended that industry.

With the loss of rice farming, fishing remains the major source of economic activity. The waters off Piaçabuçu are home to the largest shrimp population in northeastern Brazil, and the fourth largest in the whole country. Tourism is also a key revenue source for the municipality, but income from both industries has dwindled in recent years — first because of the 2019 oil spill, then followed by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Environmental Protection Area of Piaçabuçu, which protects threatened species such as sea turtles, is run on scarce resources. In September 2021, in response to ExxonMobil's proposed project, [the Federal Public Ministry in Alagoas quizzed protection areas across the region about their operating conditions in the event of an accident](#). The management of the Piaçabuçu Environmental Protection Area responded in an official letter, stating that the area has just “two employees and one vehicle,” and therefore doesn't have the “operational capacity to neither protect against nor minimize the impacts that would result from an oil spill.”

At the end of 2021, representatives from ExxonMobil visited the fishing community in Piaçabuçu. “They asked us to nominate some fishermen for their training sessions,” says Antônio Amorim, president of the local fishing community, which has nearly 4,000 members. Sixty boats were chosen to take part in the training sessions, with the larger ones receiving 2,500 reais (\$480) a day, and the smaller boats 2,000 reais (\$380). “It was helpful for those who were out of work and relying upon Bolsa Família [a social welfare program] for their income,” Amorim says. He's reluctant to criticize the project, but say another potential accident in a region that has already suffered an oil spill “is a massive worry.”

For Jasiel Martins, founder of the NGO Olha o Chico, the money from the training sessions was a means of “silencing people.” The organization is part of the managing council of the Piaçabuçu Environmental Protection Area, which was dismantled by the administration of President Jair Bolsonaro — one of a whole range of structures that fostered civil engagement and participation in public management that have been dissolved by the government. The NGO, along with more than 100 other organizations, has signed a [public letter](#) speaking out against the construction of the oil well in the river's mouth. The letter raises concerns about flaws in the project's environment impact assessment and calls for the communities threatened by the project to be consulted through in-person public hearings, which have not taken place due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the front line of the fight for the São Francisco River, Martins says he's certain that “any accident would be the end for the river.” “It's already a struggle to survive here. The *aningas* [freshwater plants] have disappeared, fish have migrated. Those of us living here on the banks of the São Francisco have it tough, we're dependent on water trucks to bring us drinking water because the water supply here is too saline.”

Quilombos at the oil's mercy

The only way to get from Piaçabuçu in Alagoas to Brejo Grande in Sergipe is across the São Francisco River. The small ferry takes about an hour to reach the outskirts of Brejo Grande, the closest point of the coastline to the project's drilling site, just 50 km (30 mi) away. In the event of a serious oil spill, oil slicks would reach this point of the coast in about two days, according to ExxonMobil's own estimations.

Four quilombos — communities formed by Quilombolas, or Afro-Brazilian descendants of runaway slaves — are found in the municipality: Brejo Grande, Santa Cruz, Resina and

Carapitanga. For the 480 families who live here, mainly traditional fishers and farmers, life is uneasy.



Studies show that the municipality of Brejo Grande, in the state of Sergipe, would be one of the first places to be hit in the event of an oil spill in the São Francisco river estuary. Image by Ailton Rocha da Cruz/Agência Pública.

Running water is scarce in the homes in the quilombos, and an internet connection even scarcer. An invitation to a digital hearing about ExxonMobil's project therefore makes little sense.

"They asked us to come and watch the hearing on a big screen in Aracaju [the Sergipe state capital], a four-hour drive from here," says Domenicio dos Santos, one of the quilombola community leaders. "And that was just for us to watch the proceedings, not even to have our voices heard."

"They [ExxonMobil] turned up and started bothering us, offering us money and training sessions," says Enéas Rosa, a fisherman and leader of the Resina quilombo. "We didn't get involved because we understood what was at stake."

Tired from her daily chores, Maria Isaltina Silva, a leader of the Brejão dos Negros quilombo, leans on the window ledge of her house. From here, she can see the Sumidouro Lagoon, a place known for its tales of magic and witchcraft. Her family has lived in this area going back at least 300 years, fishing and harvesting crabs. "People talk about emancipation, but we weren't emancipated. We're still being persecuted, just in different ways," she says. "If we want to preserve the marshes we have here, they turn up and destroy them. Our livelihood comes from the river and the marshes. We don't know anything else."

Online public hearings without internet

Jane Teresa and Jerônimo Basílio, environmental lawyers from the Canoa de Tolda Society in Sergipe, signed a [public civil lawsuit](#) seeking to stop the public hearing on the project from taking place online, [InfoSãoFrancisco](#) reported. They said the scheduling of the hearing, a

vital stage in the process of attaining an environmental license, didn't meet legal requirements, such as prior consultation of the traditional communities as stipulated in [Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization](#), which Brazil has ratified.

The Federal Public Ministry in both Sergipe and Alagoas states tried to cancel the online public consultation, in an attempt to guarantee the local population a fair and in-person hearing that would also abide by pandemic-related health protocols. However, the request was rejected by the courts. On Sept. 14, 2021, environmental regulator IBAMA carried out an [online public hearing](#), broadcast via YouTube, featuring representatives from ExxonMobil and Witt O'Brien's. Although some people received a link to participate and speak during the event, connection issues and problems with audio and video were the subject of constant complaints.

Questions during the hearing were selected and read out by Jônatas Trindade, the director for environmental licensing at IBAMA. Trindade even interrupted a representative from the fishing community as he was reading out an open letter from the communities against the project, alleging that the fisherman had passed his allotted time limit.

According to lawyer Jane Teresa, there are at least 116 quilombola communities in the region that would be affected by the project. "Many of these communities don't have internet access, so how were they even going to participate?" She adds that ExxonMobil had submitted its environmental impact assessment after the deadline had already passed, "thereby prejudicing the principle of transparency."

His colleague, Jerônimo Basílio, says it's necessary to carry out more than one online hearing, "as established by Resolution 9/87 from the Nation Council for the Environment (CONAMA), given the complexity of the impacts that project would have, involving at least five states and 76 municipalities in its zone of influence," he says.

Juliana Câmara, a lawyer with the Federal Public Ministry, sought to cancel the online hearing because of the loss of any effective popular participation. She filed a public civil lawsuit with an immediate injunction to urgently request the scheduling of a new, in-person public hearing with the participation of the traditional fishing communities who were excluded from the initial debate because of a lack of internet access. The request also calls for multiple public hearings to take place, "given the geographic range of the environmental impacts," and for "a 10,000 reais [\$1,900] fine for each administrative act carried out without the scheduling of the new in-person public hearing with the participation of traditional communities." The courts have not yet responded to the request.

Câmara is used to monitoring activities that have a large socioenvironmental impact. But some aspects of this case in particular have grabbed her attention, she says. First and foremost, she says, is the way the environmental licensing process was rushed through. "What is also interesting is the way IBAMA has behaved, highlighting issues with the project, but then quickly accepting the company's justifications," she says. She adds the ExxonMobil, which had hoped to start drilling in the second half of the year, has made clear its dissatisfaction with the inquiries coming from the Federal Public Ministry and the resistance from the communities. "They have said that the delay in acquiring the environmental license will impact business interest in their concession."

Câmara says she sought out expert analysis of the environmental impact assessment. "The experts highlighted the use of obsolete data, which did not take into account the synergistic

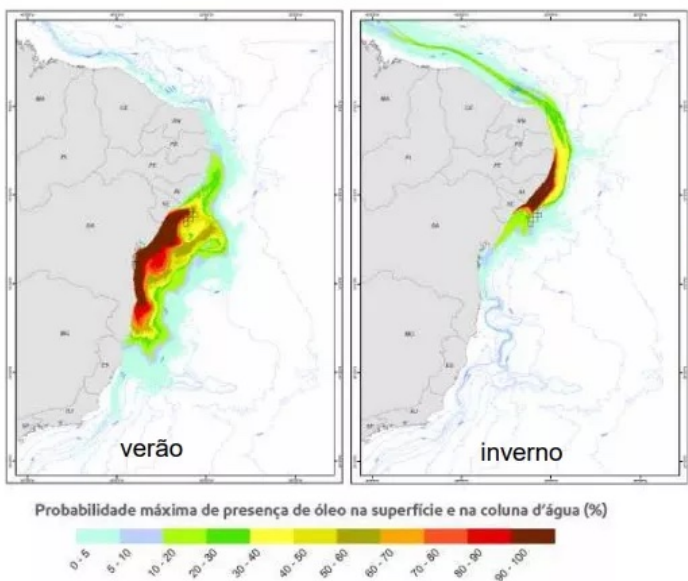
nature of the activities, which go beyond the drilling and extraction itself and also include the movement of ships transporting the oil, gas and waste products, which will be taken to be treated in Niterói [in Rio de Janeiro state],” she says.

‘The last thing you would do’

Emerson Soares, a professor at the Federal University of Alagoas (UFAL), recalls the moment he spotted the first signs of the oil as he walked along the beach in August 2019. “I came across some sand dollars” — an animal similar to a sea urchin “that had oil stains. I took them with me so I could analyze them later. A couple of weeks later, a turtle washed up that was also covered in oil.” A fishing engineer with a Ph.D. in biotechnology, Soares led the task force that responded to the oil spill in Alagoas and coordinated scientific expeditions along the São Francisco River, collecting data and promoting efforts to raise environmental awareness.

“If common sense was taken into account at all, drilling for oil at the mouth of the river would be the last thing you would do,” he says. He questions the modeling used for Project SEAL’s environment impact assessment and the studies on the spread of potential oil spills, saying they’re outdated. “They don’t take into account the most recently published research on the flow of the São Francisco River, which is constantly changing. Nor does it take into account the levels of heavy metals present in the water, which increased significantly since the 2019 oil spill, and which polluted the area around the mouth of the river.”

Modelagem de Óleo



VOLUME PIOR CASO (238.480,9m³)

Condições Simuladas no cenário de Pior Caso

1. Descoberta de óleo no reservatório
2. Falhas sucessivas de todos equipamentos e procedimentos de segurança
3. Perda de controle do poço sem intervenção por 30 dias
4. Nenhuma ação de resposta por 60 dias

Estado	Município	Probabilidade de Toque		Tempo mínimo de toque (dias)	
		Verão	Inverno	Verão	Inverno
MS	Brejo Grande	4,8%	100%	9,7	2,5
	Pacatuba	1,5%	99,6%	31,8	2,6
	Pirambu	4,4%	98,9%	4,7	2,9
	Barra dos Coqueiros	68,9%	92,2%	3,0	4,8
	Aracaju	90,4%	81,5%	3,1	7,2
	Itaporanga D'ajuda	97,4%	63,0%	3,3	12,7
	Estância	98,9%	30,0%	3,2	17,5

35

In the event of an oil spill, Brejo Grande would be at risk of being polluted within approximately two days, according to modeling carried out by ExxonMobil. The map on the left shows the extent of a spill during summer, and the one of the right during winter. Image by ExxonMobil.

Given that the true socioenvironmental impacts of the 2019 oil disaster were never truly measured, let alone dealt with, Soares says he’s concerned by the high risks associated with new activity on the river. Although experts from ExxonMobil have made assurances that the risk of a leak from the oil wells targeted for extraction is low — a one in 30,000 chance — the projections made by Soares are alarming.

Because of the weakened flow of the river, owing to the water crisis and the construction of dams along the river's course, among other factors, the São Francisco River would not be able to contain the spread of any oil spill in the river's estuary. The whole region surrounding the river's mouth would be severely contaminated by such a spill. In the worst-case scenario, Soares says, the oil would reach municipalities across the northern coast of Sergipe and the southern coast of Alagoas.

The severity of such an oil spill would depend entirely upon the extent of the leak, the response time, the time of year during which it occurred, and the currents. However, even in the most modest of scenarios, the municipalities surrounding the mouth of the São Francisco River would be the most vulnerable to contamination. What this would mean in effect is that all of the Environmental Protection Areas, the local communities and highly important economic activities for the region, such as tourism, fishing, and shrimp, oyster and clam harvesting, could be affected by such a disaster.

"That's without even taking into account the São Francisco mangrove forests, which are home to nearly 50% of the region's species," Soares says. "And it's not just about accidents, as the act of drilling for oil in and of itself has an impact in terms of the release of toxic waste materials and the increase in the number of vessels on the waterways that are involved in the extraction process, which would completely change the local dynamics and also bring invasive species to the region on the hulls of the ships."

In response to questions from Agência Pública, ExxonMobil gave the following statement:

"With regard to the maritime oil wells in the Sergipe-Alagoas basin, ExxonMobil is following every recommendation and protocol coming from the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Natural Resources (IBAMA). Our priority is to preserve the health and security of the community and the environment. We would like to reinforce that numerous meetings took place with representatives from the communities in the project's area of influence, as well as an online public hearing, led by IBAMA, which took place on September 14, 2021. The hearing was open to the public and was transmitted via Zoom, YouTube, and local radio stations, and is available for access via the following link: www.audienciapublicaExxonMobil.com.br/seal."

In a statement, Witt O'Brien's said that the consultancy was "not involved in any way in the oil disaster on the Brazilian coast" in 2019, nor did it have "any type of relationship with Delta Tankers." The company also stated that "it was not named in the police inquiry," as was suggested by the document released by the Federal Police in November 2019, but rather that it was contacted by the Federal Police in the course of investigations in order to "supply further information needed that could help with investigations."

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