December 30, 2011 (BENTIU) - Part of an oil field in South Sudan’s oil-rich Unity State caught fire on Wednesday causing a decline in production, according to local officials.

Unity produces most of South Sudan’s oil, which is still pumped and refined in north Sudan, despite the secession of South Sudan earlier this year.

The State Minister of Environment and Natural Resources in Unity State, William Gatjang Gieng, said that the fire had damaged part of the pipeline that transports South Sudan’s crude oil for export out of Sudan. The cause of the fire is unknown.

Gieng said that oil company workers had managed to rescue most of the pipelines that lay near to the standing oil which had caught on fire.

The output of of Unity’s oil fields has declined from 95,000 barrels a day to just 60,000 barrels since November this year, the minister said. In addition to the maintenance challenges posed by the swampland, there have also been shortages of manpower.

But as the dry season 30 oil wells have been repaired, which may help to resume a full level of production in the Unity oil field. According to Gieng, production had already started to increase from 60,000 to between 71,000 - 72,000 barrels a day, when the fire broke out.

Gieng urged Greater Nile Petroleum Operation Company to work hard to bring in more facilities in order to monitor all pipelines and clear up camps.

He also called on the Juba government in Juba to bring in more experts to the area to help improve the efficiency of South Sudan’s oil production.

Gieng added that they are going to deploy more security forces to the oil producing areas, to secure production. He added that the lack of engineers is also a problem facing oil production in South Sudan, and particularly in Unity State. Many engineers from north Sudan left when South Sudan became independent in July.