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BP's Crude Oil May Be Radioactive

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New Orleans attorney Stuart Smith knows something about radiation from oil drilling:

> Smith is well known for his role as lead counsel in an oilfield radiation case that resulted in a verdict of $1.056 billion against ExxonMobil for contaminating land it leased from the Grefer family in Harvey, Louisiana –– and attempting to cover it up.
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> The court stated that from June 1986 to March 1987, "Exxon officials intentionally withheld information," and that the company "knew the [radioactive] scale posed a direct danger to the physical health of those workers." Oilfield waste, or TERM, is primarily composed of radium, a highly radioactive chemical element. Exposure to radium is known to cause a variety of devastating illnesses, including cancer. Radium's impact on the human body is particularly acute because it is similar chemically to calcium –– and as such is frequently absorbed into bones after entering the body.

But at least there's no radiation being released from BP's oil spill in the Gulf, right?

Well, as Smith wrote on August 4th:

> This is directly from the EPA website discussing oil drilling activity:
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> > "These processes may leave behind waste containing concentrations of naturally-occurring radioactive material (NORM) from the surrounding soils and rocks. Once exposed or concentrated by human activity, this naturally-occurring material becomes Technologically-Enhanced NORM or TENORM. Radioactive materials are not necessarily present in the soils at every well or drilling site. However in some areas of the country, such as the upper Midwest or Gulf Coast states, the soils are more like to contain radioactive material."
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> > "Radioactive wastes from oil and gas drilling take the form of produced water, drilling mud, sludge, slimes, or evaporation ponds and pits. It can also concentrate in the mineral scales that form in pipes (pipe scale), storage tanks, or other extraction equipment. Radionuclides in these wastes are primarily radium-226, radium-228, and radon gas. The radon is released to the atmosphere, while the produced water and mud containing radium are placed in ponds or pits for evaporation, re-use, or recovery."

> "The people most likely to be exposed to this source of radiation are workers at the site. They may inhale radon gas which is released during drilling and produced by the decay of radium, raising their risk of lung cancer. In addition, they are exposed to alpha and gamma radiation released during the decay of radium-226 and the low-energy gamma radiation and beta particles released by the decay of radium-228. (Gamma radiation can also penetrate the skin and raise the risk of cancer.) Workers following safety guidance will reduce their total on-site radiation exposure."

It's time BP comes clean as to the levels and amounts of radioactive material released from this oil spill.

Here's the EPA website which Smith is quoting.

This is not to say that radiation is being released from the well at dangerous levels for the general public. Obviously, BP and the government should be pressed to release all radiation test results (or to do them if they haven't already). I haven't heard any information indicating dangerous levels, and I'll assume for now that radiation levels in the Gulf as a whole are low and not much more than background levels.

However, for the clean up workers, and when it is concentrated in landfills, crude oil from the Gulf might be a real health threat. As Smith writes:

> This is all bad enough at the spill and cleanup sites, and it's not nearly the near-term danger of all the toxins in the oil-dispersant stew. But it can become a danger when you start concentrating it in normal landfills. Remember, oil was exempted from hazmat regulations for political reasons, not because it's not hazardous.
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> And, as far as we can tell, nobody is even testing the BP waste going into those landfills and if the oil company knows radiation levels, we can expect them to keep it secret. Hey, this is the company that required a Congressional order and a Federal Court Subpoena just to release video of the spill ... we have no way of knowing what else they're not telling us.
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> And it's not comforting that the EPA, which allowed BP to use toxic dispersant to hide the oil and is now minimizing what's left through bogus science, and the Coast Guard, which allowed dispersant use even in excess of what the EPA approved, are in charge of all this. And the EPA knows better, of course.

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