

Chemical Contamination in Gulf of Mexico

'Unprecedented' Use of Subsea Dispersant to Combat BP Oil Disaster

By [Rady Ananda](#)

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On May 12, the [Deepwater Horizon Incident Unified Command](#) held a media advisory regarding the BP oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, which began on April 20th. Officials advised that subsea dispersants, the effects of which are widely unknown, are being used for the first time.

EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson and Dr. Jane Lubchenco, Undersecretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere, NOAA, opened the call with brief statements focused on the use of dispersants, chemical agents used to break up the oil.

Surface and subsea dispersants, chemical agents used to break up the oil, are being used. The use of "subsea dispersants is unprecedented," reported Lisa Jackson.

As the Deepwater Horizon oil platform is located 48 miles offshore, most of the dispersants that have been used are no closer than 30 miles to the shoreline. The subsea dispersants are used at 10 meters and deeper.

Officials monitoring the subsea results reported that the first two tests were inconclusive. Logistical problems in obtaining samples down to 5,000 feet prevented proper sampling. A third test is underway, with some samples already in the labs at Louisiana State University.

The tests involve satellite and airplane imaging, and chemical, biological and atmospheric sampling. Temperature, salinity, and particle size in situ and above surface are also being monitored.

Subsea dispersants require much less in volume than do surface ones, but the effects of their use are still widely unknown. Authorities are taking an "adaptive monitoring approach," meaning they modify the monitoring requirements as the test proceeds.

"This is no silver bullet," warned Jackson. "Dispersants are the lesser harm." The response team is also skimming the surface of oil and burning it, she reported.

Chemical dispersants can be highly toxic and some have been banned by the EPA and in the UK. A particularly toxic one, known as 9527, has been used, but officials were unable to provide the exact amount. Another dispersant, 9500, is the modified and safer version. Jackson roughly estimated that between the two, they've used each equally, but did not provide the total figure.

Jackson did say that 500,000 gallons are already staged and another 805,000 gallons of dispersant have been ordered.

The question I would have called in, had no one asked, pertained to the failure to use already stockpiled, EPA-approved, organic, environmentally-safe dispersants. We have [reports](#) in Florida that:

“a Columbian company with an office in Florida... Global Environmental Technology, has a product that is 100 percent organic and was invented in 1998 by its president, Carlos Forero. He won science competitions in Switzerland and Austria for the product, which encapsulates oil and cleans the material up. Not only does the product clean up the oil, it can also be recycled for use afterwards. In addition, if birds are contaminated, the product can [be] used for them as well.”

Three different media outlets raised this question, but officials failed to adequately respond. Finally, they admitted that manufacturers do impact the choices that authorized responding parties make as to which products to use. BP is also involved in selecting which dispersants to use.

Several questions were raised concerning reports of dead wildlife, including turtles and dolphins. Officials would not confirm whether any of these deaths can be attributed to the use of dispersants, saying that no necropsies had been performed.

When asked if they would eat fish from the Gulf caught today, Dr. Jane Lubchenco, Undersecretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere, NOAA, responded. “Yes, and I would enjoy it.”

On [April 29th](#), officials estimated that the amount of oil gushing undersea is at least 5,000 barrels [210,000 gallons] a day. Since the initial explosion, crude oil has reached the shores of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

BP Plc, Transocean Ltd, and Halliburton are being held responsible for the catastrophe, and faced a second day of Congressional questioning today, reports [Reuters](#). Meanwhile, in an effort to restrict offshore drilling, the “Senate climate bill released Wednesday would allow U.S. states to prohibit offshore oil activity within 75 miles of their coasts. Other lawmakers from coastal states have called for a complete halt to offshore drilling in any new areas, saying the risk is just too great for coastal economies.”

A May 11 video of the oil gush released by BP can be found at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jLPLSAshqk>

The official site of the Deepwater Horizon Unified Command is <http://www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com/go/site/2931/>. Those wanting Twitter updates from Deepwater Horizon can follow [Oil_Spill_2010](#)

Developing information by the EPA is posted at <http://www.epa.gov/bpspill/index.html>. EPA use of dispersants in the BP Gulf spill can be accessed at <http://www.epa.gov/bpspill/dispersants.html>. Those wanting Twitter updates from the EPA can follow [lisapjackson](#).

Information from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association is linked at

http://response.restoration.noaa.gov/orr_search.php?keywords=deepwater+horizon

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