

Illness Plagues Gulf Residents in BP's Aftermath

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ORANGE BEACH, Alabama, Nov 15, 2010 (IPS) - Increasing numbers of U.S. Gulf Coast residents attribute ongoing sicknesses to BP's oil disaster and use of toxic dispersants.

"Now I have a bruising rash all around my stomach," Denise Rednour of Long Beach, Mississippi told IPS. "This looks like bleeding under the skin."

Rednour lives near the coast and has been walking on the beach nearly every day since a BP oil rig exploded on Apr. 20. She has noticed a dramatically lower number of wildlife, and said that many days the smell of chemicals from what she believes are BP's toxic dispersants fill the air.

Yet her primary concern is that she and many people she knows in the area have gotten sick.

"I have pain in my stomach, stabbing pains, in isolated areas," Rednour added. "The sharp stabbing pain is all over my abdomen where this discolouration is, it's in my arm pits and around my breasts. I have this dry hacking cough, my sinuses are swelling up, and I have an insatiable thirst."

Rednour's recent problems are a continuation of others that have beset her for months, including headaches, respiratory problems, runny nose, nausea, and bleeding from the ears.

In response to the massive spill last summer that released at least 4.9 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, BP admitted to using at least 1.9 million gallons of Corexit dispersants - which have been banned in 19 countries - to sink the oil. The dispersants contain chemicals that many scientists and toxicologists have warned are dangerous to humans, marine life and wildlife.

A March 1987 report titled "Organic Solvent Neurotoxicity", by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), states: "The acute neurotoxic effects of organic solvent exposure in workers and laboratory animals are narcosis, anesthesia, central nervous system (CNS) depression, respiratory arrest, unconsciousness, and death."

Several chemicals and chemical compounds listed in the NIOSH report, such as styrene, toluene and xylene, are now present in the Gulf of Mexico as the result of BP's dispersants mixing with BP's crude oil.

Captain Lori DeAngelis runs dolphin tours out of Orange Beach, Alabama.

"All my muscles hurt," DeAngelis told IPS. "By the time I climb my stairs every muscle in my legs are in spasm. I'm coughing, I have a constant sore throat and hoarse voice."

In addition to these symptoms, her memory is fading. "I have totally blanked out on a lot of important stuff," she said. "I can hardly remember having talked to people who've interviewed me. That's how bad it is. I'm having to bring pen and paper with me and write down everything so I don't forget."

Last month, Dr. Wilma Subra, a chemist and Macarthur Fellow, conducted blood tests for volatile solvents on eight people who live and work along the coast.

"All eight individuals tested had Ethylbenzene and m,p- Xylene in their blood in excess of the NHANES 95th Percentile," according to Subra's report. "Ethylbenzene, m,p-Xylene and Hexane are volatile organic chemicals that are present in the BP Crude Oil. The blood of all three females and five males had chemicals that are found in the BP Crude Oil."

DeAngelis was one of the people tested.

The health problems she and Rednour are experiencing are now common along the Gulf Coast, from Louisiana all the way to Florida.

Chuck Barnes is director of the Alabama district of the Eastern Surfing Association, and is responsible for organising surfing competitions.

"In early September our local government gave the all-clear so surfers started going back into the water," Barnes told IPS. "But we immediately had several surfers get sick with headaches, upper respiratory problems, and other things and that's when I decided we needed to test the water."

Barnes says that tests conducted in the Orange Beach area "all came up toxic".

"Now I'm worried about the fact that everybody is still giving the all clear signal, but nobody [government] is doing honest testing," he said. "We have fresh tar balls washing up right now. They just turned the Gulf into their huge science experiment, and we're just sitting here under the microscope waiting to see what happens to us."

Joe Overstreet, a merchant seaman, lives in Fairhope, Alabama, which is on the coast and Mobile Bay. He also had his blood tested by Dr. Subra.

"I have a new rash on my body now, on my chest, and this is after an older rash I've had that turned into blisters. I did the blood test in Pensacola, and when it was returned I tested positive for six of the nine chemicals in BP's dispersants," he said.

Overstreet worked as an oil disaster response worker for BP.

"I take Benadryl pretty much every night so I don't wake up with a headache," he told IPS. "I have pains on my right side recently, and unbelievable headaches. When they start happening I have to stop everything. I have them every day."

Overstreet, who has worked in the oil fields and is familiar with the dangers and chemicals used, said he and his neighbours "could smell the Benzene coming up into the bay. I was working on the beaches, and on low tides we can see the clams out there. They used to be

white. Now they are all black. And nobody seems to pay any attention to this. I've lived here all my life and I know it's not right."

Like others, he is mystified by the lack of appropriate response by government authorities.

"I feel like I'm in the twilight zone. Nobody seems to be doing anything or talking about it," he said.

DeAngelis is worried about the dolphins she has come to love and protect, as well as humans living along the coast.

"It's devastating," she said. "My identity is wrapped in being Captain Lori, but I don't know if I can go on my waters and watch out for my babies, and nobody will tell us what is happening. I can't come up with the right words. This is the meanest, most deceitful, most horrible thing the government could do to us."

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