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Is Gulf Seafood Safe?

By Washington's Blog
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The FDA and NOAA say that Gulf seafood is fine. President Obama ate a fish taco yesterday made with Gulf fish.

So does that mean Gulf seafood is safe to eat?

I had hoped – for the sake of the Gulf fishermen and the entire Gulf economy – that the answer was yes. But after digging a bit, I'm not so sure.

For example, Local fishermen don't trust the safety of the fish:

> "Fishermen here are calling it 'Voodoo seafood' because we are all cursed," said Bill Thompson of Long Beach, Mississippi. Fishermen from Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and Florida gathered in Biloxi last week to discuss their fears.
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> "We do not think it is safe but the state officials say it is. Who do you trust? The people that know these waters or the government?" Thompson added.

Neither do local shrimpers:

> The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) reports that of all the samples of seafood that have been tested since the oil spill, none have shown evidence of contamination.
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> While some in the coastal seafood industry agree with these assessments, **a majority seem to view the news with a sense of betrayal.**
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> "The cleanup isn't even close to being done," said Karen Hopkins of Dean Blanchard Seafood, which accounts for about 11 percent of the U.S. shrimp supply, on the barrier island of Grand Isle.
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> "The last thing I want to do is scare anyone away from the seafood down here," said Dawn Nunez, standing at the counter of the shrimp wholesale business and deli she owns in the tiny fishing town of Hopedale. **"But if I'm not eating it or feeding it to my children, I can't advise anyone else to eat it either."**

Indeed, crabs and crab larvae have been discovered filled with oil. See this and this.

As AOL news notes:

> Petroleum contamination is known to cause cancer and brain damage. But how much oil and gas does it take to make seafood dangerous?

Obviously, low doses of even the strongest poison won't cause health problems, so it is all a question of how much oil – if any – is making it into Gulf seafood. But as the AOL News article notes, BP might be lobbying to raise the amount of oil in seafood which is considered safe.

And its not just oil.

As Fox 8 in New Orleans reports:

> Researchers at Tulane say it appears they've detected a Corexit sort of fingerprint in the orange blobs found lodged in the bodies of tiny blue crab larvae collected from marshes that stretch from Texas to Florida.
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> [University of New Orleans' Martin O'Connell, Ph.D] said O'Connell said most components of oil won't bio-accumulate, meaning oil likely won't reach the food chain. As for Corexit, he said, "no one really knows." "If you're a small fish and you eat 1,000 of these small crab larvae and all of them have oil or Corexit droplets in them they could get into the fish.. that little fish could be eaten and so on and so on," said O'Connell.

Sky News notes:

> [Dr George Crozier] director of the Dauphin Island Sea Lab is worried about the potential build up of some chemical compounds in the food chain.
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> [He] is particularly concerned about polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons... "If we do see over the years fish accumulating PAH, it will almost certainly be attributable to Deepwater Horizon... I can imagine 10 or 20 years from now there will be the same kind of health warnings about say, grouper or snapper from the centre of the Gulf, that apply to tuna from all over the world, for mercury."

NOAA admitted in a Congressional hearing that seafood isn't being tested for dispersants, even though they may bioaccumulate.

It is well-known that the EPA buried the concerns of its own toxicologists about the application of Corexit. As the Guardian points out:

> The Obama administration is facing internal dissent from its scientists for approving the use of huge quantities of chemical dispersants to tackle the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the Guardian has learned.
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> Jeff Ruch, the executive director of the whistleblower support group Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, said he had heard from five [EPA] scientists and two other officials who had expressed concerns to their superiors about the use of dispersants.
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> "There was one toxicologist who was very concerned about the underwater

> application particularly," he said. "The concern was the agency appeared to be flying blind and not consulting its own specialists and even the literature that was available."
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> Veterans of the Exxon Valdez spill questioned the wisdom of trying to break up the oil in the deep water at the same time as trying to skim it on the surface. Other EPA experts raised alarm about the effect of dispersants on seafood.
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> Ruch said EPA experts were being excluded from decision-making on the spill. "Other than a few people in the united command, there is no involvement from the rest of the agency," he said. EPA scientists would not go public for fear of retaliation, he added.
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> Independent scientists also criticised the EPA for claiming that the combination of oil and dispersants posed no greater danger to marine life on its own.
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> On Wednesday, a toxicologist from Texas Tech University is scheduled to tell a Senate hearing that the unprecedented use of dispersants "created an eco-toxicological experiment".
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> "The bottom line is that a lot of oil is still at sea dispersed in the water column," said Ron Kendall. "It's a big ecological question as to how this will ultimately unfold." Previous studies, including a 400-page study by the National Academy of Sciences, have warned that the combination of oil and dispersants is more toxic than oil on its own, because the chemicals break down cell walls, making organisms more susceptible to oil.
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> The EPA issued a report on Monday, based on a study of how much of the mixture was needed to kill a species of shrimp and small fish, just two of the 15,000 types of marine life in the Gulf. The EPA test did not address medium- or long-term effects, or reports last week that dispersants were discovered in the larvae of blue crab, entering the food chain.
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> Hugh Kaufman, a senior EPA policy analyst, dismissed the tests as little more than a PR stunt.

But isn't this all old news, because the Corexit has already broken down in the environment? Maybe. But as the Press-Register noted on August 6th:

> The stained, brown water seen washing up in pockets along Alabama beaches for the last two weeks **appears to contain the dispersant** widely used on oil from the Deepwater Horizon spill, according to a preliminary analysis.
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> Ed Overton, a Louisiana State University chemist… [who] is analyzing oil samples for the federal government… said… "indications [are] that there was a dispersant signal in the sample." … [T]he **signal was similar to a Corexit sample**.
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> Harriet Perry, a scientist at the Gulf Coast Research Lab in Ocean Springs [said]… "It looks like they found [Corexit]," Perry said of work by research colleagues at Tulane University [researching crab larvae]… "For a droplet to be that small, it has to be dispersed oil… It's supposed to biodegrade rapidly. It's supposed to disappear in days, not weeks, but **that may not be happening**."

In addition, some claim that even the chemicals left behind when Corexit breaks down are toxic, although I have seen no scientific evidence one way or the other.

The bottom line is that some Gulf seafood is probably safe and other Gulf seafood is probably not very safe, depending on where it swam in relation to the oil plumes and a host of other factors. But since the government is being close-lipped about the details of its test results – and isn't even testing for dispersants – it is hard to know whether a particular piece of seafood is safe or not.
