

Long-Term Health Impacts of 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon Disaster

Worried Gulf Residents to Hold Online Town Hall on BP Spill Health Impacts

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In April 2010, BP's Deepwater Horizon oil drilling platform exploded, killing 11 workers before sinking 5,000 feet to the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico.

Oil gushed for 87 days unchecked, creating the single-largest marine oil disaster in US history.

In response to the disaster, BP used 1.8 million gallons of highly toxic Corexit dispersants in what the oil giant claimed was an effort to keep the oil from reaching shore. Critics accuse BP of sinking the oil with the dispersants as a means of minimizing fines under the Clean Water Act.

"The dispersants contain chemicals that many scientists and toxicologists have warned are dangerous to humans, marine life and wildlife," [IPS reported in 2010](#), adding:

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 a result of BP's dispersants mixing with BP's crude oil," IPS reported, a situation which other scientific reports show creates a toxicity 40 times worse than the oil alone.

Joe Yerkes is a Florida fisherman who joined the cleanup effort of the disaster after he was put out of work by the oil in his fishing waters.

Yerkes was exposed to both oil and dispersants while cleaning up oil.

"I have spent the years since the spill happened literally trying to survive," Yerkes [told Truthout](#) in 2014.

"I've lost five friends now who were also exposed to BP's oil and dispersants, who were unable to seek proper treatment to extract the chemicals from their bodies before the exposure killed them."

“Not long after his exposure, Yerkes became violently ill, started bleeding from his nose and ears, and began vomiting blood. When he couldn’t get well, he had his blood tested and found it contained high levels of chemicals, which his physician attributed to BP’s oil disaster,”

Truthout reported in 2014.

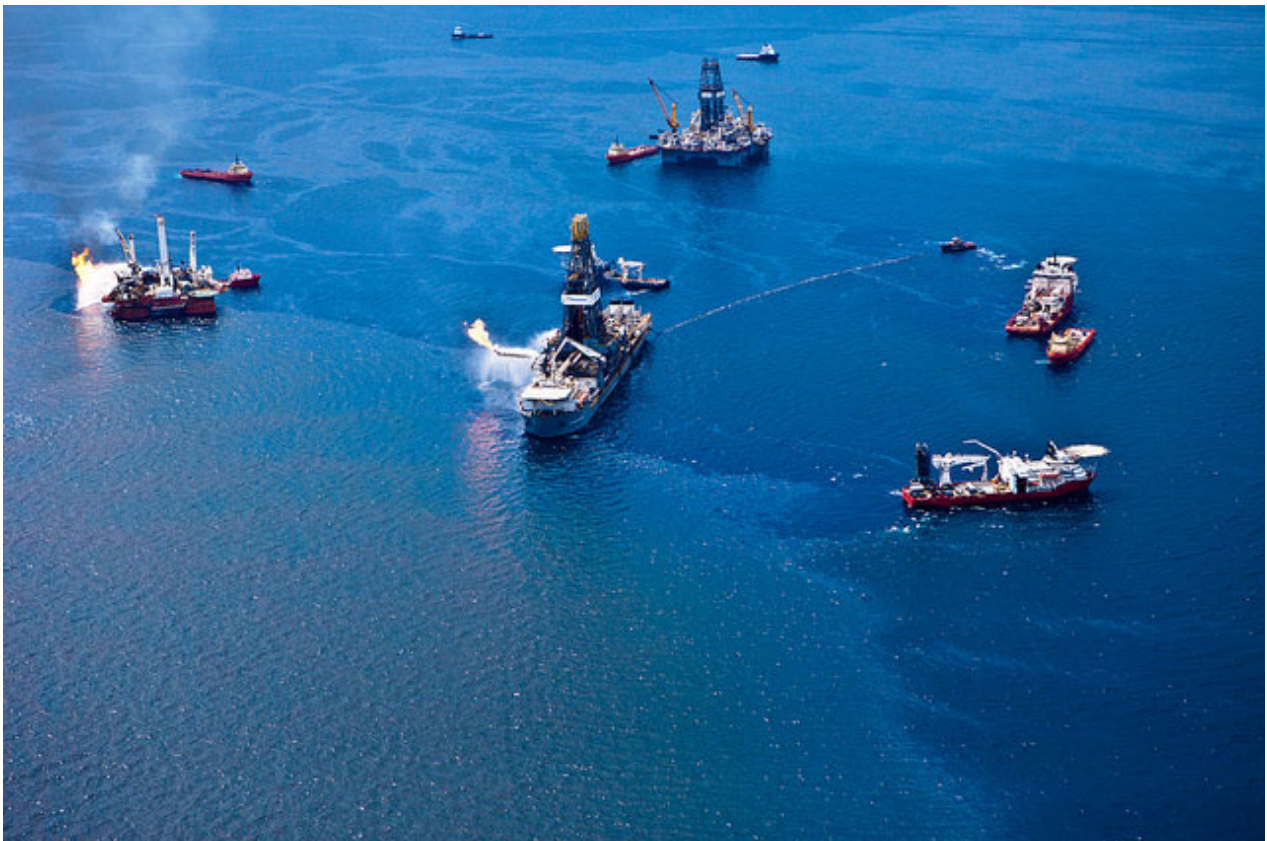
Yerkes said at the time that he had to regularly give himself intravenous treatments of saline flushes and various medications. “I have chronic headaches, a fever, and suffer chronic unbearable pain in my muscles and joints, and have had chemical pneumonia twice so far,” he told Truthout.

A few months after the disaster began, “Dr. Wilma Subra, a chemist and MacArthur fellow, conducted blood tests for volatile solvents on eight people who” lived and worked along the Gulf Coast, [IPS reported](#). What she found was alarming but not surprising.

“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.”

Yerkes also had his blood tested, and found it contained the chemicals as well.

Yet now, six years on, untold numbers of coastal residents have been suffering health effects from, they believe, BP’s oil and dispersants. A town hall is being held on April 20, the six-year anniversary of the disaster’s beginning, to bring attention to what some experts are now calling a widespread human health crisis.



Workers use booms, burning and chemical dispersants in attempts to contain the oil leaking from BP's Deepwater Horizon drilling rig in June 2010. (Photo: kris krüg / Flickr)

“There Is No More Ignoring This”

Dr. Riki Ott, a toxicologist, marine biologist and Exxon Valdez survivor, [told Truthout](#) in 2014 that she had seen “clear indications of widespread toxic chemical exposure across the four-state impact zone of BP’s oil disaster (Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida).”

“It’s pretty clear to me, after spending a year in the Gulf coastal communities during 2010 and 2011, that the suite of illnesses that developed during this time were above and beyond the background level of illnesses incurred in the Gulf,”

Ott said at the time.

Ott added that people she was seeing at the time, along the roughly 1,000-mile impact zone, were all consistently describing the same symptoms of exposure to chemicals in the oil and dispersants.

“Medical literature supports that these are the symptoms, and I would expect to see increased rates of early-term miscarriages for women, early developmental issues for children born to women who were exposed to breathing these fumes and vapors, and also continuing chemical hypersensitivity,”

Ott told Truthout in 2014.

“There is no more ignoring this,” [she said recently](#).

Ott will be participating in the town hall, which is being [streamed online](#) live at 5 pm CST. Local residents, health activists and experts will discuss chemical exposure hazards, personal stories and government actions (or lack thereof) in hopes of educating the public and bringing more people to action.

This event will also mark the launch of an international awareness campaign for populations at risk of oil and chemical exposures from industrial operations, and the announcement of a soon-to-be-released documentary film called [The Rising](#). The film chronicles stories of coastal residents experiencing extreme health impacts from BP’s disaster, and also documents a growing grassroots movement aimed at providing aid to people who need it and bringing accountability to those responsible for the crisis.

“This isn’t about, ‘I don’t care about the Gulf,’” said Kendra, a Gulf Coast parent who asked to withhold her last name due to security concerns, in a [press statement](#). “You need to take a look in your own backyard. They did it here. They will do it to you.”

Ott will moderate the town hall, where people around the world can watch and ask questions to the people affected, as well as several oil and health experts.

“The human health consequences of these types of operations have been swept under the

rug,” Mark Manning, a former oil field worker and director of *The Rising*, [said in a press statement](#). “These communities and the people in them have been sacrificed.”

Marylee Orr, executive director of Louisiana Environmental Action Network, has spoken to Truthout at length over the years about her concerns about the human health crisis BP’s legacy has caused along the Gulf Coast.

“I’ve gotten these phone calls telling me. ‘I’m vomiting and I have chest pains, excessive bleeding,’ bleeding from the breasts for women you name it,” Orr says in the [trailer](#) for *The Rising*.

Darla Rooks, the captain of a shrimp boat, adds in the trailer, “Our children are dying, our animals are dying, our babies are born premature, birth defects nobody is going to survive this crap.”

An “Attempted Cover-Up”

Hugh B. Kaufman, a senior policy analyst at the Environmental Protection Agency, has been critical of both BP and the federal government’s response to the disaster from the beginning.

“There was an attempt on the part of the government and BP to cover up the volume of the spill,” Kaufman said. “Because of the financial impact to BP, massive use of dispersants was a part of the attempted cover-up.”

The town hall and ongoing grassroots organizing in the Gulf are aimed at exposing the cover-up, as well as more broadly showing the true costs of fossil fuels to the planet and human health.

Both the film and the campaign provide “the missing and, arguably, most important piece to the climate, environmental and energy debates by connecting public health to fossil fuel operations,” Manning [said](#). “It’s hard to believe, but this connection hasn’t been made yet!”

“It is imperative that the direct connection between fossil fuel operations and disastrous human health effects be exposed because it is the ‘smoking gun’ in changing public dialogue and political positioning on energy policy,”

Manning added.

His film project, along with the grassroots campaign, intends to push human health to be a top consideration in oil operations, and to increase oil operation costs by forcing proper settlements for exposed and ailing populations.

He [hopes](#) that this will, in turn, create even higher costs as more expensive safety measures will need to be taken during production and cleanup. Rising costs would then heavily incentivize an increase in funding and support for alternative energy.

“We strongly believe that an industry forced to protect human health foremost will be forced to protect environmental health,” Manning [said](#). “By flipping the dialogue to ‘people first,’ the environment will follow because what is truly healthy for people is healthy for the planet.”

The full film trailer and film website can be [found here](#), while the community action and education website [is here](#).

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Dahr Jamail, a Truthout staff reporter, is the author of [The Will to Resist: Soldiers Who Refuse to Fight in Iraq and Afghanistan](#), (Haymarket Books, 2009), and [Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches From an Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq](#), (Haymarket Books, 2007). Jamail reported from Iraq for more than a year, as well as from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Turkey over the last 10 years, and has won the Martha Gellhorn Award for Investigative Journalism, among other awards. His third book, [The Mass Destruction of Iraq: Why It Is Happening, and Who Is Responsible](#), co-written with [William Rivers Pitt](#), is available now on Amazon. He lives and works in Washington State.

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