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EPA official defends role of dispersants in Gulf of Mexico oil spill response

Published: Wednesday, August 04, 2010, 10:00 PM



Jonathan Tilove
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The head of the EPA's office of research and development defended Wednesday the unprecedented use of **dispersants** in breaking up **the Gulf of Mexico oil spill**, even as a panel of environmentalists characterized BP's massive application of Corexit to the oil as an "experiment" with still uncertain outcomes.



BP PLC, via The Associated Press
Underwater application of dispersant is seen in this image taken from video on June 3.

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"My colleagues and I that have been studying this situation believe that a massive eco-toxicological experiment is under way," Ronald Kendall, director of the **Institute of Environmental and Human Health** at Texas Tech University, told the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. "We have very limited information on the environmental fate and transport of the mixture of the dispersant and oil, particularly in the deep ocean."

How, Kendall wondered, might the dispersant-oil mixture affect sperm whales -- an endangered species -- or larval blue fin tuna, or the seaweed that provide food and refuge for young Kemp's ridley sea turtles.

"The decision to use dispersants may have saved some birds and marshes while increasing the impacts on fish and

other marine life," said Jackie Savitz, a senior scientist with the environmental organization, Oceana. "How can we say which is more important?"

"Moving oil below the sea surface presents significant challenges to the organisms residing in this habitat," said David Smith, professor of oceanography at the University of Rhode Island. "Impacts will be less noticeable, but could be as devastating as oil washing ashore."

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Dispersants don't increase toxicity in Gulf, EPA scientist says

"These damages are not readily observed during a spill and may not be obvious for several years after the damage takes place," said Edward Overton, professor emeritus of environmental sciences at LSU, who, along with the other environmental scientists, questioned the adequacy of EPA's testing to satisfy these concerns.

For Paul Anastas, who was dubbed "the father of green chemistry" before his appointment by President Barack Obama to head the EPA's research and development office, this summer has placed him in the difficult role of having to explain and defend the dumping of some 1.8 million gallons of Corexit, the oil industry's dispersant of choice, into the Gulf, both at the surface and, for the first time ever, at the wellhead a mile below the ocean surface.

The use of dispersants, which break down the oil into smaller more biodegradable droplets, is credited in a new federal report with dispersing about 8 percent of the 4.9 million barrels of oil spewed into the Gulf since the blowout of the Deepwater Horizon well April 20.

Anastas testified that the use of dispersants, which are less toxic than the oil, had helped protect the shoreline and were degrading quickly.

EPA monitoring, he said, "shows the dispersants are not persistent in the environment; dispersants are not depleting oxygen in the water to dangerous levels" He said two rounds of testing comparing dispersants alone and in combination with oil, confirmed that Corexit had been a reasonable choice.

But the use of dispersants has roiled many environmentalists as well as state officials in Louisiana, who opposed the subsea application, even though National Incident Commander Thad Allen said Wednesday that that is where it proved most effective.

In a low-key but methodical cross-examination of Anastas, Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I., laid out just how woefully unprepared EPA was to make the momentous decision about whether to let BP use large quantities of Corexit after the well blew.

Whitehouse noted that EPA's National Contingency Plan Product Schedule, listing dispersants that could be used in such an event, was treated by the Coast Guard and others as an "approved" list, even though all that was required to be on that list was for a manufacturer to nominate itself and provide data indicating it was effective. It also had to provide its own toxicity data, but there was no threshold that would disqualify it from inclusion on the list.

sheldon_whitehouse.JPG

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Alex Brandon, The Associated Press

Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island questions EPA assistant administrator Paul Anastas on Wednesday.

"I can't think of another circumstance in which a regulatory agency approves something for use without actually coming to a formal decision that it is safe to be used," Whitehouse said.

"There doesn't appear to be an evaluating moment. Whether to use dispersants, which dispersants to use, when to use them, these are all difficult decisions. And more difficult when made on the fly and without prior review from agencies responsible for protecting our health and natural resources."

And yet, Whitehouse said he imagined that for the EPA, when the crisis came, it would have been "a little hard to say, you know, 'Sorry, B.P.; sorry, Mr. President, we're not ready to authorize the use of dispersants here because we need to do a little bit more studying, because we haven't done that yet.' You, kind of, have to say, 'Well, here's what we got. Take your best shot.' And it sounds like that is more or less what happened."

paul_anastas.JPG

Alex Brandon, The Associated Press

EPA assistant administrator Paul Anastas testifies on the use of dispersants in the Gulf of Mexico oil spill response during a Senate subcommittee hearing on Wednesday.



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Amid concerns on Capitol Hill about the how much Corexit was being used, the EPA in May ordered BP to find a less toxic alternative. But when BP balked, EPA found it could not rely on the data on its product list to rebut BP's assertion that it could not readily find an effective and safer alternative to Corexit, and undertook two rounds of testing. The results of the second round were announced this week.

"While this was a necessary undertaking, it is regrettable that this analysis was not available before the spill began," said Whitehouse. "And we still know very little about the long-term ecological impact of using so much dispersant on top of so much oil.

Anastas agreed that going forward, "applying the principles of green chemistry to dispersants is going to be essential" in order to find more environmentally friendly alternatives.

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Lee431 August 04, 2010 at 11:15PM

<http://tinyurl.com/2ckra9q>

Well, here we are, with the leak plugged, or close to it. The people on the right have the stance there never was a spill; greenies are imagining things. The people on the left don't want to talk about it anymore, as it hurts Obama's image if you suggest the spill was mishandled.

So where does this leave the people of the Gulf? In danger. Devastated. Decades before things get back to normal. And so little of us care. (I am from Michigan, this comment is directed at them, not the people of the Gulf.)Just not a priority compared to jobs for people among other things.

The following is not a political statement. I don't care about right vs. left, what I do care about is incompetence.

We had the opportunity to let The Netherlands come in and clean the spill up properly, for free. All we had to do is let them come over and take care of it. We would not. As a nation, we would not. Shame on us. And the guy in charge, President Obama, who says he was calling all the shots, should resign. Its the only honorable option for him at this point. Hiding what he did ain't going to last that long.

The Netherlands would have come over here, and not used any dispersants at all. You see, the oil is suppose to be allowed to come to the surface quickly, so that it can be easily cleaned up. You don't hit it with dispersants that keep the oil from coming up. You just don't. No excuse. You let the oil come up, and use giant skimmers to remove the oil. Skimmers with modern day equipment that can quickly separate oil from water, removing millions of gallons of oil per day from the sea. (not the 1000 gallons a day are ancient equipment could accomplish.)

Oil up to the surface, suck up the oil / water mixture, separate the oil out, throw the water back in (even if it is not totally cleaned of oil - the point is you are taking out ten times more than is going back in).

None of this was done right. Shame on all of us for not caring. (Again, directed at people from Michigan)

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marlinfish

August 05, 2010 at 1:01AM

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The EPA knew that the various types of COREXIT were toxic from previous experience and studies. thats why they initially tol BP to stop using them. But someone higher up in the administration overruled them. Considered that the Coast Guard and the FDA all are following similar patterns of excuses and feigne ignorance the order could only have come from Pres. Obama. Keep in mind that its not just BP but JP Morgan Chase that owns 28%+ of BP and they are have tons of power in this country.

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BrianJDonovan

August 05, 2010 at 5:05AM

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The National Oil and Hazardous Substances Pollution Contingency Plan, more commonly called the National Contingency Plan or NCP, is the federal government's blueprint for responding to both oil spills and hazardous substance releases. The National Contingency Plan is the result of our country's efforts to develop a national response capability and promote overall coordination among the hierarchy of responders and contingency plans.

Pursuant to NCP Section 300.310, "As appropriate, actions shall be taken to recover the oil or mitigate its effects. Of the numerous chemical or physical methods that may be used, the chosen methods shall be the most consistent with protecting public health and welfare and the environment. Sinking agents shall not be used."

Sinking agents means those additives applied to oil discharges to sink floating pollutants below the water surface.

The question is whether BP's dispersants are "sinking agents" when they are applied a mile underwater at the source of the well leak.

David Hollander, a University of South Florida oceanographer, headed a research team that discovered a six-mile (10-km) wide "oil cloud" while on a government-funded expedition aboard the Weatherbird II, a vessel operated by the university's College of Marine Science.

The underwater contaminants are particularly "insidious" because they are invisible, Hollander said, adding that they were suspended in what looked like normal seawater. "It may be due to the application of the dispersants that a portion of the petroleum has extracted itself away from the crude and is now incorporated into the waters with solvents and detergents," he added. He said dispersants, a cocktail of organic solvents and detergents, had never been used at the depth of BP's well before, and no one really knows how they interact physically and chemically under pressure with oil, water and gases.

Hollander said the contaminants raised troubling questions about whether they would "cascade up the food web." The threat is that they will poison plankton and fish larvae before making their way into animals higher up the food chain, Hollander said.

Source:

<http://renergie.wordpress.com/2010/05/25/bp-is-not-the-only-responsible-party/>

and

<http://renergie.wordpress.com/2010/07/12/bps-strategy-to-limit-liability-in-regard-to-its-gulf-oil-gusher/>

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