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A Blog About Energy and the Environment

August 4, 2010, 2:58 PM

The Politics of Dispersants

By [MATTHEW L. WALD](#)



Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

Paul Anastas of the Environmental Protection Agency, left, and David Westerholm of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration testify on dispersants before a Senate committee.



Republicans were ready to accept the use of dispersants in oil spills but Democrats were eager to get their doubts on record on Wednesday at a [Senate hearing](#) on the Deepwater Horizon spill in the gulf.

Government witnesses repeatedly described the use of dispersants as a trade-off but added that they believed they had made the correct decision by allowing the chemical to be applied; officials permitted the use of 1.8 million gallons of dispersant, an unprecedented quantity, on a spill of perhaps 200 million gallons, also a record.

“The dispersants are working to keep the oil off our precious shorelines,” said Paul Anastas, assistant administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency and the head of its Office of Research and Development. He said that

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laboratory tests by his agency had found the mixture of dispersant and the oil spilled, Louisiana sweet crude, to be [no more toxic](#) to two species tested, silverside fish and mysid shrimp, than the oil alone.

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, a Rhode Island Democrat who is chairman of the oversight subcommittee of the Committee on Environment and Public Works, called the use of such volumes “something of a grand experiment.” But Senator John Barrasso, Republican of Wyoming, said, “Those people who criticize dispersants are the same people who cannot offer one alternative to the use of dispersants in the gulf.”

Mr. Whitehouse did expose two areas of uncertainty about dispersants in questioning Mr. Anastas and a second witness, David Westerholm, director of the Office of Response and Restoration at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. One is that when a dispersant is listed for use by the E.P.A., it is because it meets a criteria for effectiveness, not for toxicity. The manufacturer does submit data on toxicity, Mr. Whitehouse said, but “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.”

The E.P.A.’s toxicity tests were not undertaken until after the spill began in April and BP began applying unparalleled quantities of the dispersant.

Mr. Whitehouse also pointed out that the test for toxicity is useless for evaluating another threat, the release of chemicals that could disrupt the endocrine systems of sea animals and, possibly, humans. The reason is that the toxicity is measured by putting shrimp and fish into higher and higher concentrations until they die; that does not allow for testing longer-term effects.

One scientist who testified at the hearing, Jacqueline Savitz, senior campaign director at the environmental group Oceana, put it this way: “If you zap somebody with a bunch of chemicals and they don’t die, it doesn’t mean they continue to develop normally.”

She [testified](#) that using dispersants probably protected sea birds and marshes at the expense of corals and fish by helping to get the oil into deeper water rather than letting it reach the shore.

The effects of the dispersant and the oil itself may not be evident for some time to come, scientists said. Dr. Ronald J. Kendall, chairman of the Department of Environmental Toxicology at Texas Tech University, said that hatchlings of the endangered Kemp’s ridley turtle crawled off the Texas beaches this time of year and fed in the gulf. If the material they feed on has been rendered toxic by the spill and the hatchlings die, that may not be obvious until years from now, when as adults they would be returning to lay eggs, he said.

Similarly, he said, “we could take out age classes of portions of the blue fin tuna, and again we may not see this for years to come.”

Edward B. Overton, a professor emeritus of environmental science at Louisiana State University, said that while silverside and shrimp were sensible species on which to run tests, they “have no relevance at all to the deep sea.”

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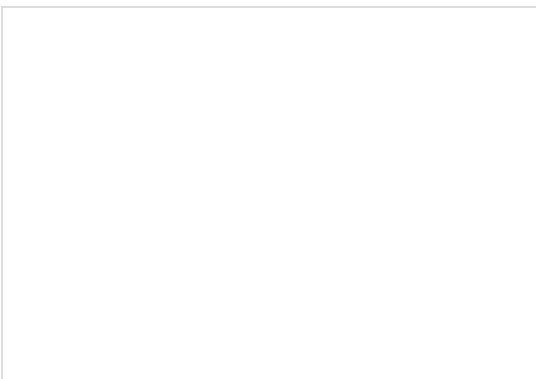
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HUFFINGTON POST
Dispersants and Oil Spills. Tradeoffs and a Lesson in Risk Perception.

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1. DonO
Queens and Cape May County
August 4th, 2010
3:03 pm

All well and good, but is there a response to Sen. Barrasso's comment? What are/were the alternatives to dispersant?

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2. joyce
new brunswick, canada
August 4th, 2010
3:03 pm

Saying there is no alternative to the use of dispersants is like someone on drugs saying there is no alternative to the use of methadone.

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3. BrianJDonovan
Tampa, FL
August 4th, 2010
3:30 pm

On July 13, 2010, Ed Overton testified before the presidential oil spill commission that much of the fear about chemical dispersants used to break up the oil in the Gulf of Mexico is unfounded. Mr. Overton said all six elements found in Corexit, the dispersant used by BP, "have been deemed safe for use in food and food packaging."

However, Sylvia Earle, the National Geographic's explorer-in-residence and former chief scientist at NOAA, stated that "the instructions for humans using Corexit warn that it is an eye and skin irritant, is harmful by inhalation, in contact with skin and if swallowed, and may cause injury to red blood cells, kidney or the liver." "People are warned not to

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take Corexit internally," she said, "but the fish, turtles, copepods and jellies have no choice. They are awash in a lethal brew of oil and butoxyethanol."

One problem with breaking down the oil is that it makes it easier for the many tiny underwater organisms to ingest this toxic soup.

Carl Safina, president and co-founder of Blue Ocean Institute, believes BP's dispersant strategy has more to do with PR than good science. "It takes something that we can see that we could at least partly deal with and dissolves it so we can't see it and can't deal with it. It's an out-of-sight, out-of-mind strategy. It's just to get it away from the cameras on the shoreline," Safina says.

For a better understanding of why toxic dispersants have been used by BP in such an excessive and unprecedented manner, visit:

<http://renergie.wordpress.com...>

and

<http://renergie.wordpress.com...>

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4. Technic Ally
Toronto
August 4th,
2010
3:50 pm

" He said that laboratory tests by his agency had found the mixture of dispersant and the oil spilled, Louisiana sweet crude, to be no more toxic to two species tested, silverside fish and mysid shrimp, than the dispersant alone. " - from above.

Shouldn't he be assuring the public that the mixture was no more toxic than the petroleum alone?

We have corrected this; thank you! -- The Editors

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5. Redduke
Tampa
August 4th,
2010
5:10 pm

Saying this is a new crisis in the Gulf is purely political. Sylvia Earle is being an extremist; her argument that ingesting the dispersant at full strength is remotely related to the actual Gulf environment is pseudo-science. This would be the same situation as what destroyed saccharin and DDT; both compounds that have been found to be safe after scientists declared them a disaster. Shame on the scientific community for, again trying to fool the rest of us.

Toxicity of the gulf water should be studied and understood. That will take year's. For now, any comments on the disastrous effect of these dispersants are a condemnation of the Material Safety Data Sheet system currently under the control of, guess who? the Federal Government. Which is it?

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6. audibleaudubon
Metairie, LA
August 5th,
2010
7:10 am

@Redduke I don't think that Sylvia Earle is being an alarmist. If anything, I would err on the side of believing her rather than slick PR propaganda from BP.

COREXIT has been banned on British shorelines for over a decade because of its destructive impact on mollusks. I have no doubt that this dispersant also has terrible effects on



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wildlife in the Gulf of Mexico. Even if this soapy brew doesn't kill birds, fish, and sea turtles instantly, it likely affects the reproductive success and health of these species. You have to remember that wildlife evolved to deal with low-level exposure to oil from natural oil seeps. It did NOT evolve to deal with a massive oil spill and the dumping of nearly 1,000,000 barrels of dispersant in a three-month period.

If you don't believe me, take a look at the LC50 concentrations of COREXIT (BP's favored dispersant) over alternatives that it could have chosen, but didn't (in the link below):

<http://blogs.edf.org...>

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Z. BrianJDonovan
Tampa, FL
August 5th,
2010
7:12 am

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:
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