



Waco-made fiber could help Gulf oil spill cleanup

By Bill Teeter Tribune-Herald staff writer

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If a new cotton-and-carbon product made by a Waco company can outshine thousands of other idea submissions, it may prove useful in cleaning up the vast oil spill fouling areas of the Gulf Coast.

Fibertect was developed at Texas Tech University under a grant from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to clean up chemical warfare agents.

It is now being made by Hobbs Bonded Fibers, 200 Commerce Drive in Waco. The material has been found to soak up oil, as well, said Ron Kendall, director of the Institute of Environmental and Human Health at Texas Tech.



Carey Hobbs, owner of Hobbs Bonded Fibers, holds a swatch of an absorbent pad that is being offered for oil cleanup in the Gulf of Mexico.

Jerry Larson/Tribune-Herald

“We did a lot of testing, and we came to find out it worked well with oil,” Kendall said. “It will hold up to 20 times its weight in oil.”

Kendall and a Virginia company marketing the product, First Line Technology, think Fibertect has a great potential in oil spill cleanup, but putting it into action is not proving easy.

First Line has notified British Petroleum about Fibertect, but BP said it is competing with thousands of submitted ideas for spill cleanup.

Fibertect consists of two sheets of cotton with activated carbon sandwiched between them. The product has been available for about a year, Kendall said.

So far, it has been purchased only for military or security agency applications. Generally, Fibertect is used for wiping down people and equipment that have been contaminated by chemical agents.

Shortly after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Mustard agent was considered a leading threat, and it was the main chemical Fibertect was first designed to soak up, said Amit Kapoor, president of First Line Technology.

Fibertect has been used in training and “real-world applications” in other countries, he said. Kapoor said he cannot discuss any of the incidents in which it has been used or the agencies using it.

Fibertect could be deployed in booms or used to wipe down objects and animals covered in oil, Kendall said. Not only does it soak up the oil, but the activated carbon separates and holds toxic parts of the oil, protecting workers, Kendall said. The material can be reused as many as four times after the oil is squeezed out, Kapoor said.

“We think it would be an excellent decontaminant for both fur and feathers,” Kendall said.

The trick is getting BP to examine Fibertect as a possible tool to help out, Kendall said. The company hasn’t accepted the material yet. Each suggestion must go through an evaluation before being accepted, said Jon Pack, a BP spokesman.

Fibertect is not exotic in how it’s made or in what it is made with, said Carey Hobbs, president of Hobbs Bonded Fibers.

Expensive materials

The product is more expensive than some other oil spill solutions, but it would make up for the cost in effectiveness, Hobbs said.

Fibertect comes in rolls of different sizes and in mitts for wiping down surfaces. A single mitt sells for \$24, but if bought in bulk, the price is \$15 per mitt. One 24-inch by 24-inch pad goes for \$76, but the per-unit price decreases as the order is increased, Kapoor said.

A roll of the material, similar in size to a paper towel roll, goes for \$380, Kapoor said. If purchased in a load of 100 rolls, the price falls to \$250 per roll.

In yet another version, Fibertect can be put out in the ocean in a 25,000-square-meter ocean blanket, which is actually strips of Fibertect attached together to form one giant oil sponge.

BP has to use technology it has on hand, which already has been shown to be effective and safe, Pack said. He said anything BP uses must be reviewed and approved by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Kendall said Fibertect already has an EPA certification that should cover its use in oil spill cleanup.

Texas Tech scientist Seshadri Ramkumar developed the material, Kendall said, and the university has a patent on Fibertect. Ramkumar, the institute and the university receive royalties, Kendall said.

Future uses could include commercial sales as a cleaning product where oily messes are common, such as auto repair shops, he said.

“We are actively looking for other applications for Fibertect,” Kapoor said.

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