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June 2, 2010, 12:47 pm

More Dispersant? Asking Hard Questions

By [LESLIE KAUFMAN](#)



In announcing on Saturday that BP would end efforts to plug the gulf oil leak through a “top kill” and focus instead on capturing oil until a relief well is in place, Rear Adm. Mary Landry of the Coast Guard said that the use of dispersants would inevitably continue.

The reasons are presumably two-fold: something is needed to break down the oil as it comes gushing out of the newly cut riser pipe before a “top hat” can be placed over it, and even if the top hat works (a big leap, to be sure) oil will still leak from the pipe.



Reuters A plane sprays dispersant over the oil leaked from the Deepwater Horizon wellhead in the Gulf of Mexico.

The use of dispersants, however, remains controversial on numerous fronts. The Environmental Protection Agency has already asked BP to find a less toxic alternative to Corexit, the dispersant that it is currently using in the gulf. But have the E.P.A. and BP proved that a dispersant is necessary at all?

Rick Steiner, a marine biologist and a veteran of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, suggests not. He explains why:

“I have been trying for some time now to get any data on the size of the oil droplets exiting the blowout before and during dispersant use,” he writes. “After considerable badgering by me, E.P.A. finally provided droplet size data during/after dispersant use” — a range of 2.5 to 60 microns, he said.

Yet there are no data on how big the oil droplets at the spill site were before BP began applying Corexit, Mr. Steiner said. So how, he asks, is one to determine the impact of the dispersant?

“The physics of these high-pressure blowouts predicts that the droplet size will be quite small anyway, even without the use of toxic dispersants,” he said. “Thus it is questionable as to why they are adding dispersant without even knowing the effect.”

“It may be a violation of federal law to approve this activity without having this understanding,” he added.

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[1.](#)

Expat

Mexico

June 2nd, 2010

12:01 pm

This is a classic case of layering mistake upon mistake when being driven by the political compulsion to DO SOMETHING, DO ANYTHING that will make it look like we're in control. Sometimes doing nothing---except stopping the gusher, of course---makes more sense. Especially when we don't know the consequences. And lack of reasonable foresight---isn't that what started this whole mess?

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Technic Ally

Toronto

June 2nd, 2010

12:01 pm

Whoops?

Use Corexit for your bad spills.

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yoandel

Boston, MA

June 2nd, 2010

12:01 pm

We also do not have, on day 43, an accurate measurement of the flow of oil by using in situ techniques for volcanic vents... Do we have pressure readings that show if the oil pressure is diminishing since the spill began? Do we even have a measurement indicating how much of the oil is natural gas?

Wouldn't it be indispensable to know the flow of oil to see if it will be possible to attach a new pipe after the latest drill cut? Or will the flow just push the new pipe off to the side?

And, what is the state of the rock surrounding the blow out preventer? We have heard some talk about problems there...

The technical circumstances of the situation are as murky as when the spill began... this is really unacceptable and so it is how the White House has allowed BP to ignore the EPA's own decisions on a less dangerous

dispersant.

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[T](#)

Columbia, SC

June 2nd, 2010

12:04 pm

"The dispersant is a toxic pollutant that has been applied in the volume of millions of gallons and I think has greatly exacerbated the situation. I think the whole idea of using a dispersant is wrong, and I think it's part of the whole pattern of BP trying to cover up and hide the body. They don't want us to see how much oil, so they've taken this oil that was concentrated at the surface and dissolved it. But when you dissolve it, it's still there, and it actually gets more toxic, because instead of being in big blobs, it's now dissolved and can get across the gills, get into the mouths of animals. The water below the floating oil was water. Now it's this toxic soup. So I think that in this whole pattern of BP trying to not let people know what's going on, the idea of disperse the oil is a way of just hiding the body. But it actually makes the oil more toxic, and it adds this incredible amount of toxic pollutant in the dispersant itself."

Carl Safina, president of Blue Ocean Institute and author of many books about marine ecology

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[CL](#)

seattle

June 2nd, 2010

12:04 pm

Thank you for bring attention to this issue -- I worry that it is not getting enough attention in the press. As several scientists have pointed out, the dispersants may be causing more environmental damage than the actual oil, both due to direct and indirect action, as it contributes to the formation of emulsions.

It makes me very uneasy that BP has been so determined to continue use of the dispersants, and that the EPA's order that they reduce the amounts was defied. Why should it be so easy for them to say 'no' to the EPA's commands???

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6.

[rockman](#)

northern hemisphere

June 2nd, 2010

1:07 pm

i am of the same opinion of others that this argument is over a corpse, the gulf may be dead and the culprit might turn out to these dispersants that nobody knows completely what the true effects are. the oil might be a decade long inconvenience but what if that noxious corexit kills the bottom of the food chain. what then hillbilly? better hope obama the socialist shows up and freezes all of bp's american assets before the republicans leave you with nothing but dirty shorts and a handful of empty dreams.

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7.

[Shannon Ferguson](#)

Washington, DC

June 2nd, 2010

1:18 pm

Why did the US government tell the PEMEX oil company to stop using Corexit on our side of the Gulf during

the last big Gulf oil well blowout (Ixtoc1, off Campeche)? <http://www.incidentnews.gov/incident/6250>
PEMEX later refused to pay our clean-up costs.

I visited Campeche last year, over thirty years later. Its beaches and coastline are still almost lifeless, except for "grumos" (tar balls). And good luck finding a "marisqueria" seafood restaurant.

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8.

Ed

Lowell Oregon

June 2nd, 2010

1:35 pm

Corexit is way more toxic than oil folks. Look it up.

If it gets into the rainwater through osmosis - watch out - end result could be way worse than an oil slime on you. To work with corexit you put on hazardous material protection gear.

Ever dealt with raw dishwasher soap? Corexit is very similar. Would you want a liquid form falling on your children?

That is why the EPA told them to stop using it.

It is toxic for 28 days or so. This madness should be stopped at once before someone gets hurt.

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9.

[John Lane](#)

Phila Pa

June 2nd, 2010

2:07 pm

Wouldn't it be much easier to collect the oil in order to scoop it up or burn it if it is not dispersed but just allowed to rise to the surface?

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10.

[Judy](#)

New York

June 2nd, 2010

2:07 pm

Isn't correxit basically deodorized kerosene? And its quite toxic. It will make the oil in the water harder to notice. Children will end up swimming in it and the kerosene makes it more likely that the toxins will be absorbed through the skin.

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11.

[Judy](#)

New York

June 2nd, 2010

2:07 pm

Correxit makes the petroleum harder to spot and more carcinogenic.

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12.

Ed

Lowell Oregon
June 2nd, 2010
4:51 pm
From Corexit's website

Composition

- Examples of everyday products with specific ingredients in common with COREXIT 9500 include:
- One ingredient is used as a wetting agent in dry gelatin, beverage mixtures, and fruit juice drinks.
- A second ingredient is used in a brand-name dry skin cream and also in a body shampoo.
- A third ingredient is found in a popular brand of baby bath liquid.
- A fourth ingredient is found extensively in cosmetics and is also used as a surface-active agent and emulsifier for agents used in food contact.
- A fifth ingredient is used by a major supplier of brand name household cleaning products for "soap scum" removal.
- A sixth ingredient is used in hand creams and lotions, odorless paints and stain blockers.

Notice how no ingredients are named. Instead we get vague references to things like "odorless paints", "stain blockers", "soap scum removal".

Realize the absurdity of this description folks. A chemical is not it's parts but the sum of its parts. I could give you a very benign description of dynamite or nitroglycerin. The individual ingredients are nothing to be concerned with for either of those. Or a terrorist could say the bomb was simple "ingredients used in harmless fertilizer".

Here is my favorite quote "common household dish soap as has a substantially higher rainbow trout toxicity than COREXIT 9527. Put another way, COREXIT 9527 is more than 7 times safer than dish soap"

Put yet another even clearer way "Corexit kills fish"

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13.

S.C.

New Orleans, LA

June 2nd, 2010

10:59 pm

Would it be pragmatic to use larger diameter segments to build something like (a) chimney(s) for the spilled oil to rise in? A short-height large-diameter base would be anchored and sealed to the sea floor around the spill site. One hundred 50-foot lengths connected and stacked one atop another could bring the oil to the surface in a controlled manner.

As each segment is dropped to the depth at which it would be joined to the stack, pressure would be equalized inside and out. Because the stack would be open and large in diameter, buoyant methane hydrate crystals would not collect at the top to clog the stack. Once the stack reaches the surface, it could be connected to a reservoir, from which pumping vessels could remove the spilled oil (like a birdbath).

What I suggest is likely too simple, but I have to suggest it. Thanks for reading this far, and if you know why this might or might not work, please comment.

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14.

F. Murray Rumpelstiltskin

Judy, Kentucky

June 3rd, 2010

4:49 am

About #12 "rainbow trout toxicity"

Rainbow trout:Threats and conservation

<http://en.wikipedia.org...>

Rainbow trout, and subspecies thereof, are currently EPA approved indicator species for acute fresh water toxicity testing.

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15.

BrianJDonovan

Tampa, FL

June 3rd, 2010

4:50 am

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.

For a more complete discussion of BP oil spill issues, visit:

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

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