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Agency Orders Use of a Less Toxic Chemical in Gulf

By [CAMPBELL ROBERTSON](#) and [ELISABETH ROSENTHAL](#)

GRAND ISLE, La. — Local and state officials here voiced desperation on Thursday as their fears became far more tangible, with oil from the BP spill showing up on shore as tar balls, sheens and gooey slicks.

In Washington, the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) said it had told the oil company to immediately select a less toxic dispersant than the one it is now using to break up crude oil gushing from a ruined well in the Gulf of Mexico. Once the agency has signed off on a different product, it said, the company would then have 72 hours to start using it.

In a letter to BP's chief executive, Tony Hayward, the agency's administrator, [Lisa Jackson](#), and Homeland Security Secretary [Janet Napolitano](#) also warned the company that it had "fallen short" in keeping the public informed. It demanded that BP release and post all data related to the month-old spill and monitoring efforts on a public Web site.

But here in Grand Isle, the focus was on the grim spectacle of what one official referred to as creeping "brownie mix." At a news conference attended by visibly furious officials who had just taken a helicopter tour of the coast, Gov. [Bobby Jindal](#) said he was particularly worried that the heavy patches of oil appeared to have moved to shore under the surface of the gulf.

"This oil has traveled 110 miles to land on our coast, and we're concerned that this is just the beginning," Mr. Jindal said. "You didn't see oil that close to our coast a day or two ago."

Mr. Jindal said officials from the Coast Guard and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric

Administration continue to tell him that heavy oil is not traveling underwater before it shows up on the coast, which he said would not explain its presence.

According to NOAA's estimates, Mr. Jindal said, the spill has already affected nearly 50 miles of Louisiana's coastline, which is full of breaks and inlets into fragile marshlands that are far more difficult to protect than sandy beaches. "No shoreline has been fully cleaned," he said.

On Elmer's Island, one of the few sandy beaches in Louisiana that is accessible by road, a thick brown frosting of oil was smeared on the shore. But inland marshes have so far been spared by a four-day project by the Louisiana National Guard that filled a 785-foot gap in the shore with sand. The guard is working to fill other such gaps along parts of the state's coastline.

Near the mouth of the Mississippi, reddish-brown emulsified oil was pooled three inches deep in some places on Thursday and had killed off cane for at least a mile along the shore. The thick black oil seen there Wednesday appeared to have been washed out by the tide, but the air was heavy with scent of petroleum.

Several officials at the news conference in Grand Isle called on [President Obama](#) to order the federal government to take over where BP has failed. "We need some action, and we need it now," said Michel Claudet, the president of Terrebonne Parish.

In directing BP to select a less toxic dispersant, the Environmental Protection Agency said it was exercising caution because so little is known about the chemicals' potential impact.

BP has sprayed nearly 700,000 gallons of Corexit dispersants on the surface of the gulf and directly onto the leaking well head a mile underwater. It is by far the largest use of chemicals to break up an [oil spill](#) in United States waters to date.

Scientists and politicians have questioned why the E.P.A. is allowing use of the Corexit products when less toxic alternatives are available.

On Monday, Representative [Edward J. Markey](#), Democrat of Massachusetts, sent a letter to Ms. Jackson at the E.P.A. demanding details of the formula for Corexit products and information about any testing that had been carried out on the chemicals.

In a statement on Thursday, the E.P.A. said, "Because of its use in unprecedented volumes and

because much is unknown about the underwater use of dispersants, E.P.A. wants to ensure BP is using the least toxic product authorized for use.”

BP said it was reviewing its options and did not detail which or how many dispersants it might propose for use.

But U.S. Polychemical of Spring Valley, N.Y., which makes a dispersant called Dispersit SPC 1000, said Thursday morning that it had received an order from BP and would increase its production to 20,000 gallons a day in the next few days, and eventually to as much as 60,000 gallons a day.

BP defended the use of the Corexit products, mainstays of oil spill control that were developed in the 1980s and '90s.

“Corexit was an E.P.A.-approved dispersant that had been widely used in the gulf and was available in the quantities we required,” said Toby Odone, a company spokesman in Houston.

Indeed, some experts, like Merv Fingas, who served as the lead oil spill expert at Environment Canada, the Canadian counterpart of the E.P.A., said Corexit was not that much more toxic than other dispersants and had a long track record of use.

Mr. Fingas said the more important question was why dispersants were being used at all in the gulf.

Dispersants are conventionally applied to move oil off the surface of the ocean to protect marine life there and to prevent large amounts of oil from moving onshore. Yet the oil is emerging from a leak 50 miles offshore and a mile underwater. Oil in such a location emulsifies and separates as it comes to the surface, so “dispersant use isn’t really effective,” Mr. Fingas said.

“But they are in a desperate situation where they have to try everything possible, hoping something will work,” he said.

With reports of oil moving into areas as far west as Timbalier Bay, La., the patience of state and local officials had worn thin.

“It seems like BP doesn’t care,” said Euris DuBois, the police chief of Grand Isle, a scenic coastal community popular with tourists in the summer.

Chief DuBois said that he met with BP officials daily and had reported to them that oil was coming closer and closer to shore, but that he had seen no concrete action. “Nobody went and cleaned nothing,” he said, “and now it’s on our beaches.”

Campbell Robertson reported from Grand Isle, La., and Elisabeth Rosenthal from New York. James C. McKinley Jr. contributed reporting from Venice, La.