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Ingredients of Controversial Dispersants Used on Gulf Spill Are Secrets No More

By ELANA SCHOR of [Greenwire](#)

U.S. EPA has quietly released a full list of ingredients in the two controversial dispersants BP PLC is using to combat the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, following weeks of complaints from members of Congress and public health advocates that the dispersant manufacturer had kept its complete formula a secret from the public.

The mysterious appearance on EPA's website of the specific chemical components in Corexit 9500 and 9527 - more than 1.1 million gallons of which have been sprayed in Gulf since the disaster began -- came as a surprise to environmental groups as well as to Nalco Holding Co., the producer of the dispersants. Nalco spokesman Charlie Pajor said the company was first informed about the full release of Corexit ingredients by *Greenwire*, not EPA.

Nalco's reaction to the lack of notification from the agency is "beside the point," Pajor added. "We did share the complete information with EPA and relevant government agencies. Clearly we didn't want to share this information with our competitors, but we certainly understand the need for information sharing."

Three ingredients of the two Corexit formulas were already available on material safety data sheets that outline the human health risks of using the dispersants in the workplace. Corexit 9527, used in lesser quantities during the earlier days of the spill response, is designated a chronic and acute health hazard by EPA. The 9527 formula contains 2-butoxyethanol, pinpointed as the cause of lingering health problems experienced by cleanup workers after the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, and propylene glycol, a commonly used solvent.

Corexit 9500, described by Pajor as the "sole product" Nalco has manufactured for the Gulf since late April, contains propylene glycol and light petroleum distillates, a type of chemical refined from crude oil. Nalco had previously declined to identify the third hazardous substance in the 9500 formula, but EPA's website reveals it to be dioctyl sodium sulfosuccinate, a detergent and common ingredient in laxatives.

Several members of Congress had pressed for EPA to require the disclosure of all Corexit ingredients since Nalco first staked a proprietary claim to the information. One of those lawmakers, Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.), released a statement to "commend the EPA" for its under-the-radar move.

"This is a step in the right direction, but we still have more work to do," Gillibrand said. "Independent researchers will now examine the short-term and long-term danger that these chemicals could pose to citizens, marine life, and the workers that are on the ground right now dealing with this catastrophe. In order to hold BP accountable and to protect our citizens, we must provide all the information to the public and independent researchers so that they can verify the unfolding situation and long-term impact."

David Andrews, a senior scientist at the nonprofit Environmental Working Group, said via e-mail that the release of Corexit ingredients "is important, but the effects of this disclosure on our response to this spill may be minimal due to the time necessary" to conduct new testing.

"Some information as to how it got [on EPA's website] would be interesting," he added in an interview.

EPA did not return several requests for comment on its decision to release the Corexit ingredients.

In a Friday letter to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson, Gillibrand noted that the agency can use existing authority under the Toxic Substances Control Act to force the disclosure of product formulas for which companies have previously asserted confidentiality. EPA had previously advised BP to find less toxic dispersant alternatives to Corexit after reports that the Nalco formulas were ranked by the agency as more hazardous and less effective on southern Louisiana crude (*Greenwire*, May 13).

"EPA had the authority to act all along; its decision to now disclose the ingredients demonstrates this," Brian Turnbaugh, a policy analyst at the government watchdog group OMB Watch, said in a blog post on the release. "Yet it took a public outcry and weeks of complaints for the agency to act and place the public's interest ahead of corporate interests."

Wilma Subra, a trained Louisiana chemist who has provided technical assistance to environmental groups since the spill, said the lack of public knowledge of Corexit ingredients has stymied Gulf cleanup workers who seek later medical treatment for symptoms that could be attributable to dispersant exposure.

"They're taken to the doctor, and the doctor doesn't know what they've been exposed to," Subra said. "That's a huge issue for medical people, having to be responsive and not knowing what it is they're having to deal with."

Subra described a recent visit to an EPA monitoring van testing air samples near the spill site, during which the officials tested for specific chemicals but "couldn't tell us" the names of the substances.

In fact, one potentially significant detail for advocates seeking to perform independent dispersant tests was left out of the EPA's online disclosure: the proportions in which the chemical ingredients are mixed to produce Corexit. "Having the full ingredients out there is only part of the information that someone wanting to copy the product would need," said Pajor, of Nalco.

This afternoon Nalco added a release to its website that matched up the chemical components of Corexit with the common household substances that it had named last month as sharing common ingredients with the dispersant. According to Nalco, ioctyl sodium sulfosuccinate is also used as a "wetting agent in cosmetic products, gelatin, [and] beverages"; sorbitan, tri-(9Z)-9-octadecenoate, poly(oxy-1,2-ethanediyl) derivs is found in body and face lotion; sorbitan, mono-(9Z)-9-octadecenoate, poly(oxy-1,2-ethanediyl) derivs is used in mouthwash and baby bath products; and sorbitan, mono-(9Z)-9-octadecenoate is found in body shampoo and juice.

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