

# Scientists detect miles-long streaks of submerged oil

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17 May 2010

A research vessel in the Gulf of Mexico discovered up to four underwater “plumes” of oil Saturday trailing from the BP disaster, strengthening claims that the spill is leaking far more oil than reported by the government. The largest of the plumes was reported to have a volume of 1.7 cubic miles, trailing thirty miles southwest into the Gulf of Mexico.

The findings bolster the claims of scientists and captains who stressed the dangers of submerged oil traveling long distances with ocean currents.

They also weaken claims by the US government and BP that most of the oil has risen to the surface, with only negligible amounts under water. Officials have used this assumption as the basis of their claim that the spill was only leaking 5,000 barrels of oil per day, according to surface photographs.

On Thursday night, National Public Radio reported claims by several scientists that the Deepwater Horizon spill was 14 times worse than officially reported, releasing 70,000 barrels per day and putting it in the running for the worst oil spill in history.

“I don’t know if the government is willfully misleading the people, or they just don’t know what they’re doing,” said Richard Steiner, a former professor of marine conservation at the University of Alaska. “But I suspect the former; they’re trying to cover up for the inadequate response of the federal government, just like BP has been trying to cover up its own negligence.”

BP said Saturday that it will resume the use of dispersants underwater to prevent oil from reaching the surface, after winning approval for their use from the EPA. Dispersants, which may be as toxic as crude oil, have been a major part of BP’s program to downplay public consciousness of the spill by keeping most of the oil hidden underwater.

Despite the immense quantity of oil that has sunk to the bottom through the use of dispersants, or never made it to the surface in the first place, surprisingly little effort has been done to study submerged oil. The R/V Pelican, which found the plume, was the first research ship to arrive at the spill site, but it only set sail on May 3, two weeks after the disaster. “That’s two weeks of vital and unprecedented data that was completely lost,” said Steiner.

The Pelican, which houses up to sixteen scientists from multiple universities, was preparing to conduct deepwater coral studies when it was called in to research the spill. Another science vessel was recently sent to the spill site, bringing the total to two.

“The Pelican happened to hit that particular plume, but I suspect that there are many, many more,” Steiner said. “At different water depths, the plumes will likely be going in different directions; they have only looked at one or two dimensions so far; there is an immense impact that is almost completely unstudied.”

He added that he had told NOAA, the Coast Guard, and other officials to assign more boats to track underwater oil but they failed to do so. “The federal government was as unprepared for this as BP was. There was simply no contingency plan,” he said.

Among Gulf Coast fishing and charter boat captains, the existence of such plumes was widely assumed. Chris Herndon, a charter boat captain in Venice, Louisiana, said in an interview Wednesday that he expected the use of dispersants, which sink oil from the surface to the depths of the ocean, to produce just such a phenomenon.

“The ocean currents beneath the water are much stronger than they are at the top, and the oil that’s still

submerged is going to travel in big streams,” Herndon said. “The submerged oil can pop up anywhere when it hits warm water; and wherever that happens, people are going to be in for a surprise.”

The plumes, which are likely composed of a semi-buoyant, “emulsified” mixture of oil and cold water, are toxic to any animals, including plankton and crustaceans, which come into direct contact with them. But scientists are worried that once the plumes rise closer to the surface, where they can be digested by aerobic bacteria, they will deplete the oxygen in the surrounding water and create huge “dead zones” suffocating marine animals who come into contact with them.

Even as these findings came out, BP, the US government, and the media have continued to downplay the significance of the spill. There have been a continual series of editorials and news stories published seeking to quiet public outrage over the event. Among the most egregious was a May 3 *New York Times* analysis titled, “Gulf Oil Spill Is Bad, but How Bad?” The latest effort comes from an article in the *Washington Post*, which seeks to paint the spill in harmony with nature.

After noting the significant quantities of oil leaked “naturally” into the Gulf of Mexico, the article ends by bizarrely hinting that the oil spill has an upside: coral will grow on the sunken rig. “Less than a mile from the uncapped well, now upside down, is the hulk of the Deepwater Horizon rig. It is now, in effect, an artificial reef, destined to become another garden of the deep.”

When he read the passage, Steiner exclaimed, “That is some of the most twisted logic that I have ever heard.” He added that, even though millions of gallons of oil are released into the gulf every year—both through natural seeps and chronic pollution—they are broken down by sunlight and bacteria relatively quickly because they exist in such small quantities. But the concentrations of oil now snaking their way through the Gulf of Mexico will simply kill everything they come into contact with. “There’s no way around it; with this amount of toxic oil, millions of organisms have already been killed,” he said.

Meanwhile, BP succeeded Sunday in inserting a suction tube into one section of the leaking drill pipe, after an initial failure. The company said it has begun funneling oil and methane out through the pipe and into

a tanker on the surface, but has not disclosed the amount of material being recovered.

It is still likely that this latest experiment will suffer the same fate as BP’s previous efforts. If water mixes in with the methane and oil gushing through the leak, the mixture will freeze and crystalize, blocking the pipe. This was what caused the failure of the “containment dome” that was lowered over one of the leaks earlier this month.

But even in the best-case scenario, the tube will only siphon off a small portion of the leak. If this attempt, too, fails, BP has another device, called a “top hat,” in reserve that it will try to lower over another leak. After that, there are at least two equally unlikely measures that it can attempt, including shooting golf balls and other debris into the pipe.

These steps, completely untested and improvised, are mostly for show. They are being put forward so BP can continue to claim that it will have the spill under control “in about a week,” week after week. The reality is that it will most likely take months for a serious solution—the drilling of relief wells to intercept the leak underground—to be put into place, if at all. By that time, according to scientists, the spill will have released over six million barrels of oil, making it 25 times worse than the Exxon Valdez.



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