

Louisiana residents report oil-spill related illnesses

Andre Damon, C.W. Rogers in Louisiana
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Two months since the start of the Gulf Coast oil spill, residents, fishermen and experts throughout the Gulf of Mexico are reporting respiratory problems and other illnesses attributable to oil contamination.

“We’re getting sick down here. People are losing their voices; our noses are running and our eyes are crying all the time,” said Dean Blanchard, operator of a Grand Isle, Louisiana-based shrimp distribution company. “I went down to Bourbon Street in New Orleans and the urine on the cement smelled better than the air does down here.”

Dr. Michael Kotler, director of Plaquemines Medical Center near Venice, Louisiana, said his clinic has treated numerous cases of people getting sick from spill-related chemical exposure. The clinic handles those cases that the US Health Service and a private medical contractor employed by BP are not prepared to handle, said Dr. Kotler.

In May, the latest month for which figures were available, the clinic saw 24 oil-spill related exposure cases. Sixteen of these patients were offshore workers employed on a rig contaminated by air-dropped dispersant.

Walter, an offshore oil worker, told the WSWs last month that he had respiratory problems after BP began spraying dispersant near his rig.

“I’ve been working around crude oil every day for six years now. I’ve never gotten a sore throat from it until now,” he said. Of the remaining oil spill-related

patients that came to the Plaquemines Medical Center, three were civilians and five were cleanup workers.

The Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals reported last week that there have been 109 incidents of health complaints related to chemical exposure from the oil spill. Seventy-four of the reports were from workers involved with the cleanup, and 35 were from among the general population, according to the health agency.

Earlier this month, as complaints of spill-related illnesses began to rise, BP downplayed the number, claiming only two cases. It attempted to attribute the others to miscellaneous causes such as food poisoning.

Wilma Subra, an environmental chemist in and advisor for the Louisiana Environmental Action Network, said that the health effects of the oil spill are only beginning to be felt.

“The crude oil on the surface formed an aerosol that blew onto land a long time before the slick even made it to the marshes, covering the entire New Orleans area last month,” she said in a telephone interview. “As the slick goes east, the impact area is shifting all the way over into Pensacola, and even farther.”

“I got reports from fishermen’s wives that their husbands were getting sick. But there’s no other work, and all the fishermen engaged in the cleanup are afraid of losing their jobs if they speak out,” she said.

“An organization that I have been working with

purchased additional protective gear for the workers onshore, but BP threatened to fire anyone who showed up to work with a respirator. A lot of the cleanup workers are handling contaminated oil with their hands, leaning over it, breathing the fumes with no protection,” Dr. Subra added.

Although many workers were concerned about the health effects of the oil spill, they are afraid to speak to the press for fear of losing their jobs. “In general, the fishermen here are afraid of speaking out,” said Laura Leckelt, a nurse working at the first aid station. “The workers signed a contract saying that they would not talk to press, and it is a breach of contract if they do.”

Although the cleanup workers were reticent to speak publicly, some agreed to be quoted on a first-name basis. Brian said that many of the cleanup workers were concerned. “The big secret is, everybody is about to get sick. This is the calm before the storm,” he said.

Dean Blanchard, the shrimp distributor, said he suspects that BP has been using dispersants within the Barataria Bay, far outside the approved radius for its use.

“We have skimmer boats reporting oil in the bay, then being told to move ten miles out and hold position overnight,” Blanchard said. “When they come back, the oil is gone. They do it at night because they’re not cleared to use dispersant so far onshore.”

Some people involved in the cleanup said that workers on the beach were generally not reporting exposure-related illness, but many of them were falling sick from working out in the sun for too long.

“At first they didn’t have proper instructions for keeping the workers hydrated and cooled, so a lot of them got overheated,” said Ms. Leckelt, who treated several workers suffering from heat stroke.

“The real problem is the workers who are skimming

water off the surface. They’re the ones who are most exposed,” said Dr. Subra. She said that OSHA responded to her claims by investigating the work conditions of beach cleanup workers. “They said that since the onshore workers would not benefit from respirators, neither would the workers operating the skimming boats,” which is simply not the case, she said.

“These fishermen are going to be sick for the rest of their lives because of their exposure to these chemicals,” said Dr. Subra.



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