

Researchers predict oil spill could reach Atlantic Ocean

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Researchers with the University of Hawaii School of Ocean and Earth Science and Technology have released a new computer model which tracks the potential spread of oil from the Deepwater Horizon spill over a period of one year. The model predicts oil could make its way around the Florida peninsula and up the east coast of the United States by autumn, where currents will then pull it out into the Atlantic Ocean.

In a press release entitled “The long-term fate of the oil spill in the Atlantic,” researcher Fabian Schloesser explains the method behind the study. The model follows 8 million buoyant particles, representing the oil spill, released from the Deepwater Horizon site between April 20, when the blowout occurred, to September 17, 2010 in ocean flow data from simulations provided by the Ocean General Circulation Model for the Earth Simulator (OFES).

“The paths of the particles were calculated in 8 typical OFES years over 360 days from the beginning of the spill,” says Schloesser. “From these 8 typical years, 5 were selected to create an animation for which the calculated extent of the spill best matches current observational estimates.”

Researcher Axel Timmerman says of the projection, “After one year, about 20 percent of the particles initially released at the Deepwater Horizon location have been transported through the Straits of Florida and into the open Atlantic.” The coasts of North and South Carolina, Georgia and Florida could be affected by the spill by October of this year, according to the projection.

The computer model produced results similar to those reached in an earlier projection created by the National Center for Atmospheric Research in June. That study also predicted the spread of oil up the eastern coast of the US and into the Atlantic Ocean, but one month

earlier than predicted by the University of Hawaii team. The NCAR projection stops at August 2010, while the latest study predicts the spread of oil through April 2011.

Timmerman says the projection shows the importance of collecting oil in the channel between Florida and the Grand Bahama Island before it can make its way to the Atlantic Ocean. He and his fellow researchers sent their findings to BP, but have yet to hear from the company after two weeks.

The computer model create by the University of Hawaii research team may be viewed on YouTube here .



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