BP workers exposed to chemical linked to Exxon Valdez spill illnesses

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A new study conducted by BP of the air quality confronting oil spill workers in the Gulf of Mexico has revealed 20 percent of its offshore responders have now been exposed to a chemical known to have caused illnesses in workers from the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill.

When data collected from thousands of personal air monitors was examined, the chemical in question, 2-butoxyethanol, was observed at levels of up to 10 parts per million in 20 percent of offshore workers—those stationed on ships operating at or near the source of the leak—and in 15 percent of near shore workers, including those involved in laying containment booms and oil skimming operations. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) standard for acceptable levels of 2-butoxyethanol is 5 parts per million. NIOSH does not have the authority to enforce its recommendations.

This dangerous chemical has been linked in Exxon Valdez spill workers to incidences of respiratory ailments, problems of the nervous system, liver and kidney as well as blood disorders. Mild exposure to 2-butoxyethanol can cause irritation of the eyes, nose and throat, while heavier exposure can lead to hypotension, pulmonary edema or coma.

The chemical is found in Corexit, the oil dispersant used by BP to break up oil spilled into the Gulf. The Environmental Protection Agency ordered BP to cease using Corexit because of the dangers it posed, but the oil giant defied the order and continued to use the dispersant. Hundreds of thousands of gallons of Corexit have been sprayed over the waters of the Gulf.

As cleanup workers continue to come into contact with dangerous chemicals in the oil and dispersants contaminating the Gulf of Mexico, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) reports spill workers are not receiving proper training. On July 7, Dr. David Michaels, the assistant secretary of labor for OSHA, released a statement saying Gulf cleanup workers are not undergoing the full 40-hour training program required under the Hazardous Waste Operation and Emergency Response Standard.

Michaels wrote in his statement, “We have received reports that some are offering this training in significantly less than 40 hours, showing video presentations and offering only limited instruction. This training cannot be shortened to anything less than 40 hours. Moreover, computer-based training, which could be offered over the Internet, can be used as part of an overall 40-hour HAZWOPER training course. However, such training alone does not meet the full course requirements.”

The Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals has reported 199 separate cases of health complaints in that state believed to be related to the oil spill. Of these, 166 reports came from spill workers, while 33 came from the general public. Among the health problems cited were nosebleeds, shortness of breath, blurry vision, rashes, nausea, tremors, chest pain and irregular heart beat.

The Alabama Department of Public Health reports 59 people in that state have gone to emergency rooms, clinics and urgent treatment centers complaining of problems believed to be related to the spill. Patients reported having been exposed to oil pollutants through inhalation, contact and ingestion.

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