

Scientists criticize White House minimization of Gulf disaster

Tom Eley**6 August 2010**

Scientists have criticized the White House's bid to minimize the extent of the Gulf oil disaster and declare it "close to an end," as President Barack Obama put it on Wednesday.

The National Incident Command (NIC) on Wednesday released a three-page document entitled "BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Budget: What Happened to the Oil?" that indicates that most of the oil from the gusher has vanished from the Gulf, and what remains is largely harmless.

According to the NIC report, one-fourth of all oil from the spill was captured or burned by BP, another quarter has been dissolved or evaporated through natural processes, and another fourth has been broken into small particles, which White House spokesmen declared to be of low enough toxicity to pose little threat. The remaining fourth has sunk into sediment and washed into the seashore.

Predictably, the report was seized upon by the media to promote the illusion that the worst oil spill in world history has been blown out of proportion, and that the Gulf of Mexico will recover very rapidly.

The *New York Times* led the media charge on Wednesday, declaring that the report reveals that "the Deepwater Horizon leak has already evaporated, dispersed, been captured or otherwise eliminated—and that much of the rest is so diluted that it does not seem to pose much additional risk of harm."

Numerous scientists, however, insist the reality is very different. The scope of the damage to the Gulf is already extreme, and will likely endure for decades.

Scientists criticize the NIC report from a number of points of view. They point out that it does not reveal its methodology or the data from which it derives its statistical conclusions, and have demanded freedom to study the sources. Even accepting the hidden data and methodology, the conclusions drawn by the White House from the statistics are unwarranted, scientists say. And they have expressed dismay that the effort to minimize the spill will make needed steps for recovery that much harder to realize.

Rick Steiner, a marine biologist from the University of

Alaska and an expert on the ecological impact of oil spills, called the study "a premature rush to declare mission accomplished, and for political reasons rather than sincere scientific reasons."

"What clearly happened is a huge toxic shock was delivered to the northern Gulf of Mexico ecosystem," Steiner told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "The damage will ripple through the ecosystem for years if not decades. Using a document like this to deflate human concern and outrage is irresponsible."

"There's a lot of...smoke and mirrors in this report," said Ian MacDonald, a professor of biological oceanography at Florida State University. "It seems very reassuring, but the data aren't there to actually bear out the assurances that were made."

Serious doubts have already been raised based on what little is known of the study's methodology.

"A lot of this is based on modeling and extrapolation and very generous assumptions," said marine biologist Samantha Joye of the University of Georgia, well-known for discovering the massive underwater plumes of hydrocarbons caused by the blowout. "If an academic scientist put something like this out there, it would get torpedoed into a billion pieces."

Steiner said that while little explanation of methodology was provided by the NIC, he believes the report's claim of a 10 percent margin of error is "absurd." For example, he noted that the data used to estimate amount of oil burned off is based entirely on the self-reported figures of contractors and BP, both of whom have a vested interest in inflating estimates.

Steiner and other scientists believe that the estimate of the amount of oil that has been evaporated was based on a modeling method used to calculate the disappearance of oil from surface spills, and not ones that take place one mile beneath the ocean's surface.

"Given what they were working with, the margin of error should be 50 percent or more," Steiner said.

Even scientists who worked on the data used in the report

have expressed reservations over the conclusions drawn.

The claim that the remaining oil is rapidly degrading, pushed by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) head Janet Lubchenco, has been contradicted by government scientists.

NOAA scientists Bill Lehr, who authored the report, admitted that the rate of the oil's degradation was not estimated. Another government-sponsored scientist, Ed Overton of Louisiana State University, said he did not "have the foggiest idea" on the rate of the oil breakdown.

A number of scientists have sharply criticized the claims advanced by Lubchenco and Obama science advisor Carol Browner that the dissolved oil is somehow benign.

The spill is "being portrayed as 'the oil is out of the environment; it's gone,'" Michael J. Blum of Tulane University in New Orleans told the *Washington Post*, adding "[T]he form of the oil has shifted. Dispersed oil is still oil. It's just in a different form."

Stefan Green, a microbial biologist at Florida State University, noted that the dissolution of the oil, its evident physical disappearance, did not necessarily lessen its toxicity. "You can pour a liter of benzene into a bath tub," Green told the WSWS. "You won't see it, but that water is very toxic."

Last week teams of scientists found oil and what appeared to be dispersants implanted in the shells of crab larvae sampled from hundreds of miles of the Gulf Coast. The finding was chilling as it suggested that the deposits have found their way into the lower order of the food chain. As smaller organisms are consumed by larger organisms—including ultimately humans—the level of toxicity tends to increase, a process scientists call "bioaccumulation."

As dubious as its scientific basis is, the NIC report's findings have been further distorted in a propaganda offensive spearheaded by the Obama administration.

Appearing on the NBC news program "Today," Browner flatly asserted that "more than three-quarters of the oil is gone. The vast majority of the oil is gone."

That is not what the report said. In fact the NIC claimed that only a quarter of the oil is "gone"—eliminated or captured by BP. At least half is still there, either in dispersed form, in sediment and on beaches, or unaccounted for.

"They're really not claiming that dispersed oil is going away," Steiner noted. "Another way of looking at this report is to say that half is still in the environment and causing havoc in the Gulf. It's just in smaller droplet sizes. That doesn't mean it's benign. Dissolved crude oil is acutely toxic—it just went into solution."

Indeed, even by the government's own count—spun into a success story—more than 100 million gallons of oil remain in

the Gulf.

"There are 10 Exxon Valdez spills that are still in the water—that has not disappeared but is still in the water being biodegraded," said MacDonald. "They're hoping Mother Nature, the old girl, is going to take care of that stuff for us. Gee whiz, I hope she can do it without croaking."

Nine leading scientists and academics on Wednesday issued an open letter to the Obama administration and BP demanding that data and the methodology used to compile the report be made public. BP scientists are under a gag order not to share their research, which the oil giant views as proprietary, while NOAA and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the US Coast Guard, and other federal agencies involved in the response have withheld virtually all information from public scrutiny. The Obama administration and BP intend to share their data with each other, but not the public and independent scientists.

The scientists' letter, addressed to Attorney General Eric Holder and new BP CEO Robert Dudley, requests "full and prompt" sharing of data used to compile the study, as well as information "relating to wildlife mortality and injury"—another closely held secret.

"Failure to disclose this scientific information in a timely manner hides critically important information from the public—the owners of the natural resources at risk," the letter states.

Barry Noon, an environmental scientist at Colorado State University and signatory to the letter, told the WSWS that without open data, it is impossible to formulate an adequate response to the disaster.

"As a scientist, I've always felt that there's a great strength in sharing research data," he said. "This is especially true when the public is paying for the collection of the data," as is the case in the federal response to the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

Steiner noted that leaving BP and the Obama administration in charge of the data was inconsistent with an open scientific approach. "BP is the responsible party, and the federal government was at least complicit in the disaster," he said. "If they really had nothing to hide there would be no issue with sharing the information."

"It was BP and the government operating behind closed doors that gave us the disaster. And here we are again."



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