

White House numbers on oil spill challenged at congressional hearing

Hiram Lee
20 August 2010

Scientists and commercial fishermen appearing before a congressional hearing Thursday challenged assertions from the Obama administration that the “vast majority” of the oil spilled into the Gulf of Mexico is gone. The House Subcommittee on Energy and Environment hearing was called to investigate the amount of oil remaining in the Gulf and the effects of both oil and chemical dispersants on seafood.

Underscoring the lack of seriousness behind the investigation, the hearing took place in the midst of a Congressional recess with most legislators having returned to their home districts for the Summer. Almost no one came back to Washington for the hearing. The only member of Congress present was Ed Markey, the Democratic representative from Massachusetts who chairs the House Energy and Environment subcommittee.

Over the past two weeks the Obama administration has carried out a media campaign promoting the assertion that most of the oil spilled into the Gulf is gone, having been evaporated, “dispersed,” burned, or collected—claims loosely based on a three-page report from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

The most outspoken critic of the Obama administration’s numbers to appear before the hearing on Thursday was Ian MacDonald, a professor of oceanography at Florida State University.

In testimony submitted to the committee, MacDonald strongly criticized the NOAA report, titled “BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Budget: What happened to the oil?” According to MacDonald, the report is “misleading and raises more questions than it answers.”

MacDonald singled out a chart contained in the report that purported to summarize its findings. “[T]he chart includes as part of the total, oil pumped into tankers

from the various caps and other tools, *oil which was never discharged into the ocean*,” MacDonald noted. “This inflates the total amount by 17 percent and gives the impression that the clean-up efforts were more effective than they actually were.”

He also criticized the report’s methodology at length. “My strong criticism is that neither the report nor its online references provides *any* citations of scientific literature, formulas, or actual algorithms that would allow an independent reviewer to determine where these numbers actually come from,” MacDonald noted. “In short, it is impossible to check the calculations of this crucial report.”

MacDonald said that recent statements from White House science advisor Carol Browner claiming that “more than three quarters of the oil” did not hold up to scrutiny. Indeed, during the hearings Bill Lehr, a senior scientist with NOAA, was all but forced to admit that Browner’s statements were false. Of the 4.1 million barrels of oil spilled into the Gulf, Lehr said “probably three fourths” remained in the Gulf waters and shores. He conceded that only 10 percent of oil spilled into the Gulf had been removed.

Regarding food safety, the committee heard from Donald Kraemer, acting deputy director of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), who reassured the panel that the chemical dispersant used by BP did not present a danger. “Current science indicates a low risk that these dispersants will bioconcentrate in seafood and they are therefore unlikely to present a food safety concern,” Kraemer claimed.

Paul Anastas of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) followed Kraemer. “BP has used over 1.8 million gallons of dispersant, at a volume never before used in the United States,” Kraemer admitted. “When considering dispersant use, we are faced with

environmental tradeoffs. The potential longterm effects on aquatic life are still largely unknown.”

In fact, the EPA was well aware of the dangers presented by Corexit 9500, the chemical dispersant used by BP. The agency attempted to ban BP from using the highly toxic chemical in the Gulf but the oil giant ignored the order and continued to spray Corexit throughout the region and at the gusher on the ocean floor.

Small business owners and commercial fishermen from the Gulf appeared before the committee during the second session of the hearing and expressed their own doubts on the trustworthiness of the federal agencies that testified before them.

Dean Blanchard, owner of Dean Blanchard Seafoods based in Louisiana, told the committee that the Obama administration’s claims were met with skepticism in the Gulf. “We in the seafood industry have very little trust in the government,” he said. “When I try to sell seafood I tell [customers] the government said they did thousands of tests and everything’s alright and they say ‘Is that the same government that said only a thousand barrels a day was leaking out of the well?’”

Blanchard said his company was having trouble getting product liability insurance due to the spill. He expressed concern that if people became ill due to food contamination, he would shoulder the blame. “Who’s going to be responsible?” he asked, “I have a feeling if I get sued, I’m going to be the one paying the bill.” Blanchard told the panel that out of work fishermen were “hesitant to fuel up their boats” and invest in the necessary supplies for a season of fishing because they feared they would not be able to sell their catch if it were contaminated.

Acy Cooper, a fisherman and vice president of the Louisiana Shrimpers Association echoed these sentiments. “We have oil on the bottom of our waterways,” he testified. “We have reports of numerous fish kills. We know the oil’s there. NOAA keeps saying the oil’s not there. Everybody says it’s not there. We know it’s there.”

Cooper said he was assigned as a cleanup worker in one bay in Louisiana for two months. He expressed concern that BP was closing down cleanup operations with oil still contaminating the waters. “They said the oil’s not there,” he said. “The last day I was working for BP, I found oil. It was on the bottom. I brought the

Coast Guard, I brought BP and showed them. You stir the bottom up and the oil comes up.”



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