

Scientists find large amounts of oil on Gulf of Mexico seafloor

Hiram Lee

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A study by independent scientists investigating the Gulf oil disaster has shed new light on the continuing environmental catastrophe in the region.

Researchers with the University of Georgia this week discovered large amounts of oil reaching for miles on the Gulf of Mexico seafloor. The layer of sludge is as thick as two inches in some areas and stretches up to 80 miles from BP's Macondo wellhead. The findings contradict those of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) which claimed in August that the vast majority of oil spilled into the Gulf—as much as three-fourths—was now gone.

The University of Georgia research team is led by Professor Samantha Joye, of the University of Georgia's Department of Marine Sciences. Joye recently spoke to National Public Radio (NPR) about her research. "I've collected literally hundreds of sediment cores from the Gulf of Mexico, including around this area. And I've never seen anything like this," Joye told her interviewer. She described the oil sludge as "very fluffy and porous. And there are little tar balls in there you can see that look like microscopic cauliflower heads."

While chemical tests still need to be performed to verify the Macondo well as the source of the oil found on the seafloor, Joye is confident the oil originated with the spill. Had the oil found in her samples originated from natural seepage from the ocean floor, the sediment would have been "oil-stained top to bottom," as Joye wrote on the blog documenting her research. Instead, the samples recovered by Joye's team clearly show oil in a layer on top of the sediment and not saturating the entire sample. The layer of oil is relatively fresh; beneath it, Joye's team found recently dead sea life including shrimp, tubeworms and other small invertebrate animal life.

While oil has been discovered on the seafloor at depths of up to a mile, oil coats the bottom of the Gulf in shallow waters as well. In addition to their deepwater findings, Joye's team have found oil in waters with a depth of between just 300 and 4,000 feet. These shallower waters are critical to marine life in the Gulf, with many fish diving to the seafloor in these areas in search of food. The contamination of the seafloor there will have consequences throughout the ecosystem.

While research by scientists like Samantha Joye has begun to expose the extent to which the BP oil disaster has devastated the Gulf environment, many independent scientists based in universities throughout the southern US are finding themselves starved of funding. The National Science Foundation, the sole federal agency to have granted money for oil spill research, will have run out of money on October 1 and will not be in a position to award further research grants until the next fiscal year.

In May, BP set aside \$500 million for the purpose of funding research into the oil spill, but the bulk of that money has yet to be distributed to scientists. Lisa Suatoni, a scientist with the Natural Resources Defense Council, has protested delays in funding, saying "Time is of the essence. Knowing the answers to basic questions like how much oil is below the surface, where is it going and what is its fate—those are answers that are slipping through our fingers."

Dr. Harriet M. Perry, the director of the Center for Fisheries Research and Development at the Gulf Coast Research Laboratory, whose research into oil contamination of blue crab larvae has been stalled because she has run out of money for further research, recently told the press, "Independent research is being squeezed by federal agencies on one side and BP on the other." She added, "It's difficult for the fishing

community and the environmentalists to understand why we are not receiving the money that we need.”

If the work of independent scientists like Joye and Perry are crippled by a lack of funding, the majority of research in the Gulf will be carried out by those scientists directly employed by the federal government or by BP itself. With independent scientists unable to do their work, much of the story of the Deepwater Horizon disaster will be told by those who have a direct interest in covering it up.



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