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Subject: Weekly update on oil disaster 7-19-10

Dear Friends of Florida's waters:

I'm sure that each of you are doing the same thing I am, which is watching the television with bated-breath in hopes that the gushing hole in the Gulf of Mexico will soon cease to flow permanently. As we have been told, that will not be the end of this nightmare, but the end of the beginning. There is a tremendous amount of information available now, but the main problem that I have on a regular basis is figuring out what is credible and what is not. The news and information spans the spectrum between pure PR spin on the one hand to wild speculation on the other. This leaves many of us confused, discouraged and/or scared. What are we supposed to think?

Here's what I have learned since our last update:

STATE AND FEDERAL RESPONSE EFFORTS - Local governments are reporting that coordination with the state has improved in recent weeks. Escambia County finally got reimbursed for the millions of dollars that they have spent up through the end of June and the state is in the process of taking over the private contract that Escambia County had negotiated to protect its coast and resources. The problem that was created for local governments when the state was changing its policies and procedures on a daily basis sometimes, has improved.

Another recent change is that BP now has a representative at several Panhandle local response sites.

Early in the process, Escambia County offered its Emergency Operations Center as a central coordination site, but BP declined the offer. An operation center is now established at Bayou Chico and serves Escambia and Santa Rosa Counties. Other similar centers are established in counties to the east.

HEALTH AND SAFETY ISSUES:

Air quality - The DEP and EPA websites have air quality data from their monitoring stations but they are averaging the data over 24 hours or longer (maybe up to a week as far as I can tell), so that data is not helpful in my opinion. Lately the air quality in the western panhandle has been much better in terms of not smelling the oil like we have in previous weeks and months. However, our members in Panama City and Port St. Joe reported strong oil odors last week. They contacted the local health department who told them that the air was fine and that they were imagining the odors. Whatever.

Water quality - If you visit the FL DEP website, you will find air and water quality data. The problem is that they only have two basic findings: non-detect or detected but not believed to be related to the BP oil disaster. Hm . . . Just across the Florida/Alabama line, the water and sand were tested by the local TV station WKRK and they found high levels of oil in the beach and sand where children were swimming and playing.

There has been less oil coming ashore in the Panhandle over the past week or two and that seems to be mostly by the graces of Mother Nature, more than a great improvement in the mechanical efforts to keep the oil at bay. The NOAA website and others shows the concentration of surface oil to be about 80 to 90 miles off the coast of Pensacola today. There is essentially no way to keep the oil out

of Pensacola Pass due to the depth and swift currents. The only thing that is being done is to try to clean it up after it enters the pass. It has moved at times as far as the Bob Sikes Bridge.

To track oil, the Coast Guard is using a hot-air blimp that cruises back and forth along the coast, which is actually quite impressive. They report that the oil is visible from above but is impossible to see from down in the water until late in the afternoon. They often see swimmers in the water with oil and they are completely unaware of its presence. All of the Florida beaches are open and ready for business.

At Perdido Pass, booms are being used with marginal success apparently. Destin Pass has a different technology in place, which is apparently being somewhat successful as well. The lengths of coastline that have no passes cut or maintained (for natural passes) seem to be getting a lot less oil on the beaches, such as Navarre Beach. I have no scientific information to support this observation, but it makes sense when you think about it.

Methane – http://204.90.20.174/oilspill/documents/methane_fact_sheet.pdf

This is DEP's fact sheet on the concern that has been raised regarding the possibility of a tsunami that would be induced by a methane explosion under the floor of the Gulf at the well site. I'll let you draw your own conclusions. I truly don't know what to think about this.

HURRICANES - Everyone on the Florida Gulf Coast should think about how a hurricane in the Gulf might affect their property and/or their ability to return home after a major hurricane. I have inquired of state Emergency officials if there will be a statewide policy regarding whether homeowners would be able to return home after a hurricane, if there was land contamination from oil/chemicals. I have been told that state emergency officials are discussing this issue but all decisions will be made on a county level.

In discussing this with NW Florida emergency operations officials, I was told that in the event that a storm washes oil/chemicals onto the land and/or into residences and businesses, there would be several factors to consider. If it is fresh oil that has not weathered and contains high levels of VOCs (volatile organic compounds), then that would be the worse case scenario as that would likely pose a health concern. If there is a health risk, then people will not be allowed to return to their homes as long as that risk is present.

If the debris is contaminated, or the roads are contaminated with oil/chemicals then that will dramatically slow down the removal and recovery process and time. In advance of a storm scenario, officials have no way of knowing if the oil would come ashore, how much oil could come ashore, where it would appear or whose property would be impacted. The prudent thing to do would be to remove anything that is important to you from your home or business that you aren't willing to part with permanently.

There are many unknown answers to questions concerning liability in the event of a hurricane. You should definitely check with your insurance agent about what your coverage will offer you in terms of protection. One thing for sure is that federal flood insurance does not offer loss of use coverage. So, if there is a storm surge that deposits oil/chemicals on your property, making it unusable for a period of time and that is the only damage you have (meaning there is no wind damage that would trigger a wind policy claim) then even if you are prohibited from returning to your home by local authorities, you will have no loss of use coverage from your flood policy.

If there is wind and oil damage then the answers will vary depending on whom you have wind insurance with. Most wind policies exclude pollutants in the definition of damaged. Like I said, there are many unanswered questions at this point. As I find out more, I will pass the information on to you. There is a meeting of state Emergency Operations directors next week and this is one of the many discussions that will happen there.

Any liability that BP should assume will likely be addressed in a court setting and will probably not be settled quickly. I'm trying to think positively that the hurricanes are going to miss all of us for the next couple of years (at least).

Financial impact – one final bit of unwelcome news that I learned today from my insurance agent is that in the past week, he personally knows of two different mortgage companies that are refusing to write mortgages for homes on Pensacola Beach because of the oil. This is very troubling news and I'll let you know when and if I learn more about it.

That's probably enough information for one update. Much of this is not water quality related per se, but as we are seeing, the quality of our water can affect many aspects of our lives. We have seen in previous hurricanes that contaminants do get washed on shore and into peoples homes when storm surges occur. For instance, during hurricane Ivan, dioxin and arsenic contaminated sludge was dislodged from the bottom of Perdido Bay and washed into the yards and homes of hundreds of families living around the Bay. In that case the state and local governments couldn't have cared less that a discharge from the International Paper Company mill in Pensacola had caused thousands of people to be at risk from exposure to these toxic chemicals. Local residents had to get the sludge tested to determine their risk level.

It is impossible to know how a similar situation involving BP's oil will be handled. As individuals, we have little or no control over BP's oil right now. But, facilities that are willfully discharging toxic chemicals into our coastal waters (many without current permits) while the FL DEP looks the other way, are putting us at risk and this lax implementation and enforcement of the Clean Water Act should end. These polluting industries include papermills, phosphate mines, coal-fired power plants, chemical plants, sewage plants, and others. If you live within 50 miles of any of these types of facilities, then you may want to check into your exposure risk in the event of a storm surge.

In closing, if you live anywhere along the Gulf Coast, I want to still urge you to make sure that your local government is ready to protect your local beaches and waters in the event that the oil makes its way to your area. It is better to be prepared and never have to use the plan than to suddenly find yourself facing oil contamination and have no precautions in place.

For all of Florida's waters,
Linda Young
Director