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Dispersing Is Not Cleaning: Congress Must Investigate Oil Spill-Dispersing Chemicals

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Global Research, May 16, 2010
Care2 15 May 2010

Region: USA
Theme: Environment, Oil and Energy
In-depth Report: THE BP OIL SLICK

As of Friday, May 14, 517,000 gallons of chemical dispersant have been applied to the BP oil spill in the Gulf. The chemical, Corexit–also known as deodorized kerosene–is used to break up oil into tiny drops, which then sink underwater. The oil may sink, but it does not "go away." Toxicology expert Dr.William Sawyer notes, "With respect to marine toxicity and potential human health risks, studies of kerosene exposures strongly indicate potential health risks to volunteers, workers, sea turtles, dolphins, breathing reptiles and all species which need to surface for air exchanges, as well as birds and all other mammals." While the dispersants contain toxic elements, no one really knows their full potential effects. Mother Jones reports that the toxicity statements filed by Corexit's maker acknowledge: "No toxicity studies have been conducted on this product."

What is in Corexit? We don't get to know. The exact ingredients are a protected trade secret under U.S. law as it currently stands.

The New York Times notes that other dispersants may be as effective while being significantly less toxic. The Corexit advantage is that it is a child of the oil industry, manufactured by Nalco, which "was once part of Exxon Mobil Corp. and whose current leadership includes executives at both BP and Exxon." If the company will not voluntarily reveal what it is dumping into open waters, it is time to force it to do so.

But isn't it better to try to disperse the oil so it goes away? Isn't anything better than the oil? Protect the Ocean observes that "Oil is toxic at 11 ppm while Corexit is toxic at only 2.61 ppm." So Corexit is about four times as toxic as the oil it is being applied to. Of course, there is way less Corexit being dumped than oil, but the relative toxicity argument doesn't really "hold water" when you consider that we're not dumping Corexit instead ofoil, but in addition to it. The corollary to this is that if the oil "disappears" from human sight, then BP won't be under as much pressure to clean it up. The dispersants could save BP a ton of cleanup costs and PR embarrassment. But the food chain (yes, including us humans) will not be spared, as the oil works its way onto our dinner plate, species by species.

The appalling disaster of the Gulf oil spill may have slim silver linings by discouraging future off-shore drilling and encouraging stricter regulation of the oil industry and of its government watchdogs. A Care2 petition here is urging Congress to require that the chemical makeup of these dispersants be revealed so that informed decisions can begin to be made, outside of the back rooms that are ruled by money and influence.

Please sign Care2's petition to Reveal Dispersant's Toxic Secrets:

http://www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/979/606/413?z00m=19845812

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