

Environmental Disaster: Coalition Rallies for BP Accountability

"In five to 10 years from now, people along the Gulf Coast are going to be dropping dead from cancer"

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BATON ROUGE, Louisiana, Nov 1, 2010 (IPS) - Gulf coast fishers, conservationists, seafood distributors and oil workers rallied here at Louisiana's capital over the weekend to demand that oil giant BP be held accountable for the "ongoing" use of toxic dispersants in the Gulf of Mexico.

"We don't have the open sores and blisters caused by BP's toxic dispersants that the people in Plaquemine's Parish have," Karen Hopkins from Grand Isle, Louisiana told IPS. "We are being poisoned by BP's same dispersants, but our symptoms are more lethargy and depression symptoms caused by chemical poisoning."

Hopkins, who works for Dean Blanchard Seafood, a large and well-known seafood distributor, was a member of the Oct. 30 Rally for Gulf Change, whose organisers said they were working towards "preserving our God-given rights to clean air and water for future generations."

Drew Landry, who describes himself as "a songwriter who works for a commercial crawfisherman", told IPS that he first grew concerned about BP's mishandling of the oil disaster, which began on Apr. 20 when the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, by what he saw the oil giant do the following day.

"I played a concert in New Orleans on Apr. 20, and the next morning went to take one of the classes on how to clean oil," Landry told IPS. "I realised it was not about cleaning oil, but rather BP's effort to get a roster of names of commercial fishermen from whom they'd have to defend themselves against in the future."

The organisers and speakers at the rally that was held on the steps of the state capitol building on a sunny Saturday were most concerned with BP's massive use of toxic dispersants to sink the oil. The dispersants were also injected at the wellhead to keep most of the oil from reaching the surface.

BP used Corexit 9500 and Corexit 9527, both of which are banned in Britain and at least 19 other countries. Chemicals released from the combination of crude oil and dispersants can cause health problems that include central nervous system depression, respiratory problems, neurotoxic effects, genetic mutations, leukemia, birth defects, cardiac arrhythmia, and cardiovascular damage, among many others.

"I've had lung problems, auto-immune problems, nausea, headaches, and bronchitis because of BP's disaster," Beverly Armand from Grand Isle told IPS. "When I leave the area it clears up, and when I go back, I get sick again."

Armand said her doctor has placed her on three different antibiotics, none of which has been very effective, and had her blood tested for hydrocarbons.

"My creatine level is high, and they found creosote in my blood," she explained. "And we still have fresh oil coming in, and BP is still spraying Corexit. The stuff they are calling algae is foam caused by the dispersants."

Protesters held signs that read "Hell No It's Not Over", "Ban Corexit Now", and a drawing of a pelican with the words "I want my life back" – the last also a reference to comments by the former chief executive of BP, Tony Hayward, which were widely deemed insensitive to struggling Gulf residents.

Organisers told IPS that several people were unable to attend the rally because the interstate 10 highway from Lafayette was closed due to a chemical spill.

Susan Price, a small business owner from Chauvin, Louisiana, told IPS that she has been suffering from health problems since she was exposed in August to chemicals she believes are from the oil disaster.

"I'm worried for my grandchildren," Price said at the rally. "The seafood is woefully under-tested for toxins, while the government and BP are patting themselves on the back for a job well done. We will not be lulled, be silenced, or stand down. We will fight to protect our people and our land."

James Miller, a commercial fisherman from Mississippi, told onlookers that he found oil and dispersants in the water while fishing recently.

"I've had diarrhea, vomiting, the sweats, and been hospitalised for three days," said Miller, who worked 73 days for BP as an oil spill responder. "I've seen the dead turtles, dead birds, dead dolphins and dead fish, and I've taken people out on my boat to show them the oil. It's still there, and I can tell you the seafood is not safe to eat."

Later that afternoon, the group convened a meeting at the Manship Theatre in downtown Baton Rouge.

Rob Coulan, a businessman from Harvey, Louisiana, spoke of neuro-toxic side effects of the dispersants that have been well documented since at least 1987. "BP knew what this stuff would do long before they ever used it in the Gulf," he said.

"BP used a world record amount of dispersants in our Gulf," Marylee Orr, the executive director of Louisiana Environmental Action Network, said. "And we are doing petroleum hydrocarbon tests on soils, waters, and seafood and finding extremely high levels."

"We still have oil, and all the problems associated with it," Orr added. "And all the fishermen in this room will tell you that they [BP] are still using Corexit. The dead and dying birds and wildlife are merely a reflection of what is happening to us."

Cherri Foytlin, whose husband works in the Gulf oil industry, announced that every Louisiana

state representative and senator had been invited to both events. While she said that two had responded to her invitation by agreeing to meet with them, no one showed up at either event.

“In five to 10 years from now, people all along the Gulf Coast are going to be dropping dead from cancer, and that includes children,” Foytlin said, before directing her next comments towards BP. “I’m not your experiment. This is my life. Our Gulf is not your experiment.”

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