

New Evidence Links BP to Health Crisis in the Gulf

By [Brad Jacobson](#)

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BP's stock has already bounced back. The media has mostly moved on. But the long-term health impacts on Gulf Coast residents from the catastrophic oil spill are only beginning.

Exhibit A, says chemist Wilma Subra of the Louisiana Environmental Action Network, is a [recent evaluation](#) she performed of blood sample analyses from eight BP cleanup workers and residents in Alabama and Florida.

Originally collected on four separate dates throughout August, all the blood samples — from three females, age 44, 46 and 51, and five males, age 30, 46, 48, 51 and 59 — contained dangerously high levels of volatile organic chemicals found in BP crude oil, including Ethylbenzene, m,p-Xylene and Hexane, Subra explained during a wide-ranging interview with Alternet.

She clarified that the subjects whose blood was analyzed had been exposed to the oil for at least three full months before samples were collected on August 2, 3, 12 and 18.

Testing for the same chemical markers, Subra hunted down BP's crude fingerprints out in the field all along the coast, in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida's panhandle.

"I've found there's still huge amounts of BP crude oil on the sediment soils, in the wetlands, on the vegetation, and in the tissue in the oysters, crabs and mussels."

The acute health impacts of these chemicals include severe headaches, nausea, respiratory problems, burning eyes and throat, earache and chest pains.

Subra, who is also a microbiologist and the recipient of a 1999 MacArthur Fellows "genius grant" for her environmental work, pointed out that coastal residents have already entered an early phase of long-term exposure, where they're experiencing chronic effects such as liver, kidney and central nervous system damage, decreased lung function and heart disease.

"A whole host of different kinds of cancers" can follow, she added, including cancer of the lungs, liver, kidneys and blood.

The original analysis of these blood samples, which was performed by Metamatrix Clinical Laboratory in Pensacola, Florida, wasn't evaluated for chemicals found in the dispersants used by BP. But Subra said those dispersant chemicals have many similar acute and long-term impacts.

Contrary to rosy statements by BP and Obama administration officials about the Gulf's swift restoration, her prognosis for those sickened by the oil spill is grim.

“The people that are sick are going to be sick for the rest of their lives,” Subra said. “This isn’t just a short time that they’re sick and then they’ll get well. These issues are long-term chronic health impacts that will linger.”

She pointed out that 21 years after the Exxon Valdez oil spill, people in Alaska are still experiencing related health issues today.

BP has seen all of Subra’s findings but hasn’t responded.

“I’ve sent them the data,” she said, “but I didn’t really expect them to respond.”

How They Got Sick

In her meetings with coastal residents, cleanup workers and volunteer health care providers, Subra has seen firsthand the devastating effects of the mix of oil and dispersants on the health of vulnerable populations.

She explained that many people have become sick through contact with these chemicals while working to clean up the oil spill and blames BP directly for not only failing to provide proper protective gear, such as respirators, but also threatening to fire cleanup workers if they wore them.

“The Louisiana Environmental Network [LEAN] actually provided protective gear and respirators,” said Subra. “But the fishing community was told, ‘If you wear the respirator, you’re fired.’”

The workers, many of whom were fishermen who had joined the cleanup to earn money after the waters were despoiled and closed by the spill, had to choose between supporting their families or protecting themselves from chemicals found in the oil and dispersants.

But these fishermen also had another prime incentive to get those BP jobs.

“They desperately wanted those cleanup jobs to protect their natural resource, their estuaries and marshes,” Subra noted. “So they thought that if they got out there to put out enough booms and do enough skimming that they would protect it enough that the resource would be there.”

As a consequence, they’ve been made ill but most are too frightened to speak out because they’re afraid to lose their jobs.

“Their wives spoke out early on and they were told if their wives continued to speak out they’d be fired, or if they spoke they’d be fired,” said Subra, adding that, for this reason, LEAN had stepped in to help voice the concerns of the fishing community.

According to all the reports she’s received, she confirmed that BP officials and BP contractors, not federal officials, leveled these threats against cleanup workers attempting to wear adequate protective gear or speaking publicly about the related health effects.

While BP’s cleanup in the Gulf is winding down and many workers have already been laid off, a lot of them are still out there and this practice continues today, said Subra.

“So right now, the ones that are continuing to work out there are provided gloves and bootie

covers or foot covers and that's it. No adequate protective gear, no respirators.”

She added, “And they're just getting full of oil as they work. Routes of exposure are inhalation, ingestion and skin contact. And they're exposed to that every single day, the whole time they're out there.”

But some coastal residents not involved in the cleanup have also been sickened by the oil and dispersants.

Even before the slick began moving inshore, Subra explained, many people were exposed to the aerosol formed when the crude was pushed up into the air by high winds and heavy seas.

As the dispersants began being applied, they mixed into this aerosol as well, followed then by the toxic brew of the controlled burns of oil on the water, all of which drifted to populations along the coast.

“A huge number of people on the coast were exposed to this aerosol,” Subra said, adding that this issue has received even less attention than the health impact to the cleanup workers.

A Crisis Unfolds, Little Relief in Sight

Subra, who has worked on these types of issues for 40 years on behalf of communities and victims, is appalled at the lack of health care sickened cleanup workers and coastal residents have received so far.

She noted the irony that the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) has begun a comprehensive health-tracking program that plans to monitor the related health impacts from the spill and cleanup of 75,000 workers and volunteers.

Aside from the fact that this study will take a very long time to complete and thus data will not be readily available, it does not address the immediate or even longer-term health needs of those who have been sickened.

“The program itself is not going to provide medical care,” explained Subra. “It's going to provide long-term monitoring of these people who are sick, but not ‘here's a doctor you can go to deal with this situation.’”

What's more, the study will not include the large swath of residents along the coast who were affected by the toxic aerosol but who weren't involved in the cleanup.

“That population will not be monitored at all by the NIEHS study,” she said.

Meanwhile, in addition to their health issues, many of the fishermen have lost their ability to earn a living.

“They don't know whether they're going to have a job fishing or shrimping or crabbing in the next year or how many years they won't have a livelihood,” Subra said.

As a consequence, she is seeing a spike in depression developing in these communities, including a number of suicides, and more and more coastal residents under suicide watch.

What about BP's \$20 billion compensation fund?

Subra finds it "inadequate," pointing out that those who worked for BP during the cleanup are supposed to have their earnings subtracted from whatever compensation they wind up receiving.

For that reason, she's certain the money leftover won't be nearly enough to address their lost wages and livelihood as well as their related health problems.

Besides, Subra concluded, "No amount of money can make up for this."

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