

Putting A Lid on the Truth: Underwater Oil Plumes. The Oil Spill is far worse than the Surface Slick would suggest.

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On Saturday, the New York Times brought the world's attention to the discovery by a team of researchers on the vessel Pelican that there are [large underwater plumes of oil emanating from the Deepwater Horizon spill](#). Remarkably, the response of the government to the attention focused on this discovery has been to [tell the researchers to stop granting interviews](#) with the press. At the same time, [the blog on which the researchers had been providing updates](#) has also fallen silent since Saturday.

[Pensacola television station WEAR filed a report](#) (video at the link) on the oil plume and broke the news about the scientists being muzzled by the government:

Over the weekend, a research crew from the University of Southern Mississippi found evidence that there are 3 to 5 plumes... About 5 miles wide, 10 miles long and 3 hundred feet in depth.

But after giving that information to the press, the lead researcher now says he has been asked by the federal government... Which funds his research... To quit giving interviews until further testing is done.

What an interesting change of course for the government. Even the [government's website on the Deepwater Horizon response](#) had been touting the mission of the Pelican as recently as May 6:

The university fleet research vessel Pelican, operated by the Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium, departed Cocodrie, La., late Tuesday and arrived at the spill source on Wednesday. They will return on Sunday for more supplies, and go back to the site later that week.

The ship had been outfitted and ready to support a different NOAA-funded mission, but it was scrubbed in favor of gathering timely and much-needed data close to the oil spill source.

"This sampling mission is one of many NOAA responses to the oil spill," acting NOAA assistant administrator for NOAA Research Craig McLean said. "It fills an important gap in researching the interaction of spilled oil and the ocean environment. The samples will help us better understand affected ocean resources."

"We plan to sample as close to the well head as is safe, reasonable and

allowable,” said Ray Highsmith, executive director for NIUST and principal investigator for both the original and revised mission. “We then plan to travel northwestward toward our long-term study site.”

The question now becomes whether the government, in the form of NOAA (which sponsored the research) is merely asking for a pause in order to process data more fully, or if it is putting the lid on a story that shows the oil spill to be far worse than the surface slick would suggest. One way to judge the answer to that question will be to see how quickly the research team is able to find ship time for gathering more data. Here is one of the researchers, [Dr. Vernon Asper, speaking with NPR on May 16](#) with interviewer Guy Raz (in the only post-May 15 interview I’ve been able to find for any of the researchers):

RAZ: Vernon Asper, what will you and the scientists aboard the Pelican be looking at in the coming days and weeks?

Dr. ASPER: The first thing we’re going to do is analyze our data and analyze the samples. And, of course, we’re planning our next cruises. We’re already making inquiries into finding ship time. It turns out that the limiting factor for studying this plume is the availability of research vessels.

The research fleet in the United States for academic purposes has been dwindling over the last few decades, and there just aren’t ships available. So we’re having a hard time getting access to vessels that can take us out there.

If the US government, acting through NOAA, is truly interested in understanding the extent of underwater oil plumes emanating from the Deepwater Horizon spill, then they will be able to arrange access for this team to gather more data aboard the Pelican or another research vessel very soon. On the other hand, if the desire of the government is to divert attention from what could be very disturbing results, then somehow this team just won’t be able to find ship time in the next few months.

In the meantime, we have the [first report of tar balls washing ashore in Key West](#). The material will be analyzed, and if the profile matches the material from the spill, then we will have confirmation that the oil has entered the loop current. Since we don’t see surface oil that far south, how could that oil reach Key West? Perhaps traveling as a plume under the surface?

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