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May 20, 2010

EPA set to force switch to safer dispersant

Federal environmental regulators today are set to force a change in [the chemical dispersants being sprayed over the Gulf of Mexico](#) and injected a mile underwater in a bid to break up the crude flowing from crumpled pipe at BP's Macondo well.

The Environmental Protection Agency's expected move today -- already cheered in advance by Rep. Ed Markey, D-Mass., and confirmed by congressional aides -- will force responders to switch from the Corexit brand of oil dispersant they have been using to a less toxic and possibly more effective alternative.

In the month since the April 20 explosion of the Deepwater Horizon rig, more than 650,000 gallons of the Corexit oil dispersant has been sprayed or pumped underwater directly at the leak. Made by the Sugar Land-based Energy Services Division of Nalco Co., the product is [among 14 dispersants registered with the EPA](#) for breaking down oil into tiny droplets that can be eaten away by naturally occurring microbes.

But [lawmakers have raised questions in recent days about the decision to go with Corexit](#), and insisted that less toxic options are available. Markey [speculated whether the underwater delivery of Corexit](#) was contributing to the possible development of large oil plumes underwater in the Gulf.

Markey cheered the EPA's anticipated move, which he said addressed his "concerns that the dispersant BP chose to use is more toxic than other available formulations."

"The effect of long-term use of dispersants on the marine ecosystem has not been extensively studied, and we need to act with the utmost caution."

EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson told a Senate panel on Wednesday that her staff was "working with manufacturers, with BP and with others, to get less toxic dispersants to the response site as quickly as possible."

Although the agency had allowed BP to spray the dispersant over oil slicks on the surface of the Gulf, [it wasn't until Friday that the EPA green-lighted the deep-sea injection of those chemicals](#) at the site of the gushing oil. Jackson described the decision as a trade-off between the harm of allowing oil to accumulate and the possible damage to marine life from the detergent-like substance.

BP's dispersant of choice was a hot topic during a House Transportation and Infrastructure hearing Wednesday, as lawmakers repeatedly challenged the company's decision to go with Corexit. Several questioned whether corporate ties between BP and Nalco prompted the choice.

Nalco's Board of Directors includes Daniel Sanders, the former president of ExxonMobil, and Rodney Chase, a nearly four-decade veteran of BP, who most recently was a managing director and deputy group chief executive.

Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., noted that other "less toxic and more effective (options) come from a company in which (BP doesn't) have someone sitting on the board."

[Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., noted](#) that other dispersants on EPA's registry, such as Dispersit, by Chestnut Ridge, N.Y.-based Polychemical Corp., has a safer measured

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Gulf rig disaster



On April 20, 2010, an explosion on a deepwater drilling rig 40 miles offshore Louisiana launched what could be the largest environmental disaster in U.S. history. Despite rescue efforts, 11 of the 126 workers on the rig are presumed dead. The rig sank, leaving a leak at a subsea well spewing thousands of gallons of crude oil a day. [See our Oil Spill page for complete coverage](#) of the investigation and cleanup of the accident at the Deepwater Horizon, a half-billion-dollar rig owned and operated by Swiss-based Transocean and leased to BP.

About the blogger

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toxicity and a higher effectiveness rating. The same is true of Mare Clean, a product from Japan's Taiho Industries Co., [and at least 10 others on the EPA's list](#).

Rep. John Hall, D-N.Y., also questioned why the Dispersit that is manufactured in his home state was passed over. "A former 11-year-board member of BP sits on the Nalco board," he said. He wondered why "Corexit would have been chosen over . . . a less toxic and more effective product, like Dispersit, for instance, which you would think would be a better choice."

BP America Chairman Lamar McKay defended the choice on Wednesday, and suggested that a key concern was ensuring an adequate supply of whatever dispersant was chosen. "I don't have any idea what the supply chain is for any of those other dispersants," McKay told the transportation panel.

Immediately after the April 20 explosion of the Deepwater Horizon rig and the discovery of leaking crude a mile under water, Nalco delivered its stockpiles of two types of Corexit to the Gulf of Mexico and ramped up production of the product. By the end of this week, Nalco estimated that "efforts to meet Gulf oil spill respondent requests for dispersants would have generated about \$40 million in sales," but that is only a small portion -- about 1 percent -- of the company's expected 2010 revenues.

So far, about 655,000 gallons of dispersant had been deployed -- including 600,000 on the surface and 55,000 under the water.

Posted by Jennifer Dlouhy at May 20, 2010 10:02 AM

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Comments

On CNN's AC 360 last night, the BP spokesperson said Corexit was "nontoxic and biodegradable." Now EPA is saying other dispersants are "less toxic" than Corexit. Which is it, BP??

Posted by: JKK at [May 20, 2010 10:49 AM](#)

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