

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: DISPERSANT USE IN BP OIL SPILL



What are dispersants?

Dispersants are chemicals that can be used to break up oil and speed its natural degradation. They are generally less harmful than oil and biodegrade more quickly than untreated oil. In the case of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, dispersants have been useful in breaking up the oil offshore and preventing more oil from reaching fragile coasts and wetlands.

Why has BP been allowed to use dispersants?

Under the National Contingency Plan, BP is preauthorized to use approved dispersant on oil spills more than three miles away from the shoreline and no closer. BP prepares an oil cleanup plan each day and is required to get permission daily from the U.S. Coast Guard in consultation with EPA for any surface application of dispersants. Copies of dispersant requests and approvals are publically available at <http://www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com>.

Authorization has come with strict conditions on monitoring of environmental conditions, amounts of dispersant applied and full transparency about the dispersants in use.

With the exception of 200 gallons of surface dispersant used on July 19, dispersant use has ceased since the well was capped on July 15, 2010.

Is dispersant use monitored?

The Coast Guard and EPA have carefully monitored the use of dispersant in the Gulf. EPA continues to closely track oxygen and toxicity levels, as well as other indicators, to gauge potential impacts of undersea application.

EPA is testing for dispersants near the shore and has detected no dispersant compounds. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and EPA scientists are conducting rigorous ongoing monitoring and analysis of the effectiveness and toxicity of the dispersants used. To-date, the results from toxicity testing have not shown any significant effects on aquatic life.

Mobile air monitors taking samples throughout the region have detected only very small amounts of compounds that may be related to dispersants. These amounts are well below anything likely to cause harm to health or the environment. Because of their low concentrations, and the fact that these compounds are common in cleaning products and coatings, it's difficult to know with certainty whether the small amounts detected are related to the spill or from other commercial products.

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Seafood is also being closely monitored to ensure its safety. Tests have not detected dispersants in seafood.

Are there limits on the amount of dispersant that BP can use?

The Coast Guard approves surface dispersant application when preferred control methods such as skimming or burning are not available due to weather conditions or oil location. When oil was leaking from the well, BP had a daily limit of 15,000 gallons a day for undersea application.

Were approved dispersants tested for their effectiveness and toxicity?

Yes. Prior to ordering BP to reduce dispersant usage, EPA directed BP to analyze potential alternative dispersants for toxicity and effectiveness. BP reported that they were unable to find a dispersant that is less toxic than Corexit 9500, the product currently in use in the volumes required for the response effort.

Following BP's response – and to ensure that decisions about ongoing dispersant use in the Gulf of Mexico are grounded in the best available science – EPA began its own scientific testing of eight dispersant products.

EPA's results indicated that none of the eight dispersants tested, including the product in use in the Gulf, displayed biologically significant endocrine disrupting activity. While the dispersant products alone – not mixed with oil – have roughly the same impact on aquatic life, JD-2000 and Corexit 9500 were generally less toxic to small fish and JD-2000 and SAF-RON GOLD were least toxic to mysid shrimp.

While this is important information to have, additional testing is needed to further inform the use of dispersants. The next phase of EPA's testing will provide test results on the acute toxicity of multiple concentrations of Louisiana Sweet Crude Oil alone and of combinations of Louisiana Sweet Crude Oil with each of the eight dispersants for two test species.

For more information on dispersants please visit <http://www.epa.gov/bpspill/dispersants>.