

No clue how to deal with this enormous spill

Rich Heffern | Jun. 8, 2010



Lafayette, La. ? Reports that BP has been capturing 10,000 or so barrels per day of the oil that gushes from the site of the Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico off Louisiana's coast don't impress Woody Martin, chair of the state's Delta chapter of the Sierra Club.

"After six weeks of oil gushing from the site, it's a pitiful comment on the lack of preparedness on the part of the oil industry. Twenty to 25,000 barrels of oil are pouring out, so it depends on whether you're a glass is half full or half empty kind of person, I suppose."

Oil drilling and extraction is a major source of the wealth in Louisiana and the Gulf Coast, and "now once again it shows its ugly, dark side," Martin told *NCR*.

Along with the oil industry canals, pipelines and access locations that have slashed Louisiana's fragile coastal wetlands to ribbons the Deepwater Horizon event has brought environmental and economic calamity.

Sierra Club Delta chapter volunteers now make regular on-site observations. "We've kayaked out not far into the Gulf and have seen our black oil guest arrive," Martin said.

Louisiana, in spite of the wealth the oil industry brings to it, is at the bottom of the scale for almost any measure of human well-being. "We are in the top five percent for illiteracy, we have a low high school graduation rate, one of the highest cancer rates in the country. Yet our oil industries get huge tax breaks and incentives to extract resources and then fail to give back."

The Deepwater Horizon gusher means that the tourism and fishing industries have been sacrificed in favor of keeping the other three quarters of the economy ? the oil and gas industries ? alive, Martin says, but now the jury is out on the future of offshore drilling as well. The impacts of the undersea gusher on people, wildlife and landscape may torpedo any further drilling. Meanwhile Gulf coast residents deal with those impacts.

"Worst case scenario is that they can't stop it; the second worse is that hurricanes stir it up and bring it far inland, further destroying the marshes and wetlands and polluting people's homes."

Martin points out that no one has a clue how to deal with a spill of this enormity "Do we break up the large

molecules of oil into smaller ones that make it easier for microbes to consume it? Do we leave it on the surface, or is it better to disperse it through the water column? No one really knows."

BP executives have pledged to restore the Gulf Coast to its state before the Deepwater Horizon spill, just as a terminally polluted Lake Erie in the 1950s and 1960s was restored. "It takes a singularity of purpose to bring back a completely devastated environment. That singularity might not mix well with the oil business," Martin said.

Further complicating the situation, during congressional hearings in May, BP and others were put on notice that the spill could change the future of offshore drilling.

That's bad news for the huge facilities that have been constructed over the past few years that support offshore drilling and their crews. For example, \$20 million in bonds was raised recently to improve facilities at Port Fourchon on the Louisiana coast. "Now taxpayers in Lafourche Parish may be stuck with those bills," said Harold Schoeffler, a Louisiana Sierra Club activist.

"Thirty-one thousand people living on 1,800 oil drilling platforms in the Gulf can't drink the water there; a whole industry has developed to supply them. If offshore drilling goes down, that whole little enterprise and others like it will collapse too," Schoeffler said, adding additional strain to an already overstressed situation.


Martin believes that easy oil is gone for good. "As our fossil fuel addicted economy goes farther and deeper for coal and oil the risks of environmental devastation and loss of human life will increase. This country needs a comprehensive energy policy and legislation that puts a price on carbon and moves us away from dirty coal and oil toward clean energy solutions. We already have the technology, but we have been lacking the political will to establish an energy economy that provides a level playing field on which renewable and clean energy can compete."

Marylee Orr, director of the Louisiana Environmental Network, hopes that the will to change our economy will come from the grief and tragedy playing out on the Gulf Coast now.

"After Katrina and the other severe hurricanes since 2005 "we didn't think anything more could happen. But since 2001 we've had 868 fires and explosions in the Gulf so this is not entirely new to us. But the enormity of this and the legacy it will leave behind are hard to articulate.

"Some say Mother Nature is tough and resilient, that if we work together as a team we can help her rebound. That optimism keeps us going. We love where we live. We have to make some serious changes as a country though. I can't imagine you would need anything else to make you think more deeply about it."

[Rich Heffern is an *NCR* staff writer. His e-mail is rheffern@ncronline.org]



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