NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Louisiana's 'Erin Brokovich' faces her toughest challenge

Rich Heffern | Jun. 10, 2010

Wilma Subra has been called 'Louisiana's Erin Brokovich.' (photo by Rich Heffern)

New Iberia, La. -- Wilma Subra is a chemist by trade, a grandmother and president of her own small company, she has been involved for more than 30 years with her state's oil and gas drilling production issues and environmental and human health impacts. She has helped communities deal with the adverse effects of the oil industries' activities by providing chemical analysis of pollutants and serving as an expert witness in courts on their behalf.

On June 7, Subra testified before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations of the House Energy and Commerce Committee in Chalmette, La.

I interviewed her in her office on the outskirts of New Iberia on June 9, as her answering machine fielded countless incoming calls from news media, activists with state environmental groups and concerned Louisianans.

Their beautiful state has 7,721 miles of tidal shorelines. As we are now seeing, the coastal areas of Louisiana are highly vulnerable to negative impacts from crude oil spills. Yet she is convinced that the technology to clean up such spills has not kept up with the exploration and drilling technology and the result now is the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history.

"Two years ago at the mile 100 mark up the Mississippi River above New Orleans, a merchant ship cut an oil barge in two resulting in a huge spill. They put out containment booms around the barge for a hundred miles in 24 hours, yet afterwards there was as much oil outside the booms as inside.

"That clearly showed us then that the technology can't keep up."

In the absence of better techniques, BP's strategy to contain the Deepwater Horizon spill has included the use of chemical dispersants. "That technique moves the crude oil throughout the entire water column from surface to sea bottom where it kills the small organisms that live there. This will have long lasting effects on sea life, as it's killing the food chain from the bottom up."

She points out that admittedly the weather was bad when the rig exploded and the gusher began "but routinely they deal with such weather in the extensive offshore drilling that's done in the North Sea in Europe."

Once oil began to come on shore, BP's policy has been to ID it to prove it's theirs before taking any action. "That has delayed response by the individual parishes [civil entities equivalent to counties] that have to wait for the analysis to come back before they can take action."

Additionally the state has been using water diversion tactics to flush fresh river water out into the marshes, the Atchafalaya basin and into the Gulf itself to keep the oil slick at bay. "Of course, some of this water comes from what is called 'cancer alley,' the area between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, site of many chemical factories that dump toxic waste into the water."

What's more, that toxic mix enters what is called the "Dead Zone," that large area of water with low oxygen concentrations located below the mouth of and just to the west of the Mississippi river's entry into the Gulf.

Subra believes that each decision being made in response to the Deepwater Horizon spill has some positive and some very negative impacts to human health, the environment and ecosystems along the coastal areas of the Gulf.

"These decisions are being made for the most part by federal agencies with limited input from the populations most impacted by the decisions."

Subra's prime concern now is that the spill and ongoing failure to control the source of the spill have resulted in the formation of crude oil aerosols in the air which have moved ashore ahead of the oil slick and continue to move on shore. These aerosols have caused people all the way to Florida to experience odors, she says. "In Louisiana though, they have resulted in health impacts including headaches, nausea, respiratory impacts, irritation to eyes, nose and throat and asthma attacks."

In order to offset the loss of livelihood on the Louisiana coast, BP was encouraged to hire local fishermen who have first hand knowledge of the wetlands, marshes and water bodies, to install booms and absorbent pads to protect the coastal areas and estuaries and to participate in cleanup activities.

On May 4 the Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN) and the Lower Mississippi Riverkeeper (LMRK) began distributing protective gear to the fishermen to utilize during cleanup activities. This equipment included respirators, goggles, gloves and sleeve protectors.

"Workers hired by BP began reporting health symptoms right away. Workers were reluctant to report these symptoms for fear they would lose their jobs. The fishermens' wives spoke out but soon they stopped out of fear their husbands would lose the work."

On May 16, OSHA issued a detailed directive on the training required for specific task responders and stated that it was monitoring the training and observing cleanup efforts to insure that workers were provided protective equipment and instruction.

Still BP failed to provide respirators to workers exposed to crude oil. "Shrimpers have been using their boats as oil skimmers. The oily skimmers and pads are pulled into the boats by the crews with bare hands and no protective gear."

On May 26 some workers got sick on the job and were transported to the hospital, Subra said. "They reported nausea, headaches and chest pains. One oil drilling rig in the Gulf has been shut down because workers got ill

from the air emissions for the crude oil slick. Doctors in the hospitals have reported that they're not sure how to treat ill workers because they don't know the exact nature of the chemical brew to which they were exposed."

Subra says it's an ongoing fight to get workers protected, "and it shouldn't have to be like this. We should have been more prepared and proactive."

Many shrimpers have been hired by BP then put on "standby" status. "Their contract stipulates they cannot use their boats to, for example, convey the media out to sites where the oil slick has come ashore."

This adds to a widespread lack of good information in the area where the slick is coming ashore. "Folks are hungry for news of this and, in particular, information about how to deal with the possible health hazards, and it's not there."

Suba says she believes there are ways to continue offshore drilling -- which is such a large part of the economy of south Louisiana -- without taking the huge risks that resulted in the Deepwater Horizon spill. "With appropriate safeguards and adequate response plans in place, this never would have happened."

[Rich Heffern is an NCR staff writer. His email is rheffern@ncronline.org.]

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