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BP spill threatens to go global

By: Reese Halter

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I've been covering the Gulf oil spill for more than six weeks. Recently, during a national U.S. television interview, I said "BP's Gulf oil spill is a global ecological disaster."

It was no exaggeration. Consider the following: Since April 20, a vast amount of oil has bled into the Gulf of Mexico. According to BP, it's about 750,000 litres a day; researchers at Florida State University estimated about five weeks ago it was at least 3.8 million litres a day; and even more recently engineers from Purdue University estimated it's probably closer to 9.5 million litres a day.

The ominous plumes of oil venting from this pipe at the equivalent of 152 atmospheric pressures -- one mile beneath the surface -- are behaving unlike any other oil spill ever observed before. That is, oil is rising to the surface but in some cases is sinking, just how deep, so far, remains unclear.

Allowing the plumes to naturally disperse has many consequences. Microbes that eat oil require oxygen and they suck it out of the sea, creating oxygen-depletion zones. Crude that washes onshore is deleterious to all life, so thousands of miles of boom have been deployed to prevent it from landing.

In an attempt to break up these massive slicks of oil, BP has used more than 5.3 million litres of Corexit oil dispersant, more than 285,000 litres near the leak site. Dispersant has never been subjected to trials deep in the ocean before.

Dispersants contain molecules that look like a snake; the head likes water and the tail likes oil. Dispersant pulls the oil into the water in the form of tiny droplets. Essentially, the dispersant increases the surface area, spreading smaller droplets that contain more toxic components of oil throughout the marine ecosystem.

Oil contains a suite of toxic chemicals, including known carcinogens called polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons.

The dispersant increases the exposure to oil by creatures that live or feed in surface water (algae, fish eggs, jellyfish, whale sharks) or on the sea floor (sea squirts, shrimp, blue crabs, lobsters, oysters). The oil droplets look like food to filter feeders, such as oysters. These droplets can also clog fish gills.

A lot of lessons were learned from the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska's Prince William Sound. A form

of the dispersant Corexit was used there, too. Nineteen months after that spill the dispersant was not only evident in the marine ecosystem but mussels were still poisoned.

And the effects of spreading the polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons were far and wide as they caused developing hearts of Pacific herring and salmon to fail.

People exposed to Corexit suffered a number of long-term respiratory and other ailments.

Research from Israel in 2007 clearly showed that dispersant kills coral reefs and significantly retards re-growth.

Florida is the only state in the continental United States to have extensive (about 6,000) shallow coral reefs near its coasts; most are located in the Florida Keys. These reefs, from 5,000 to 7,000 years old, are the third-largest coral reef formation on Earth.

Surrounding the corals are extensive beds of sea grasses. Between the reefs and the sea grasses are more than 500 species of fish: spiny lobsters; snow crabs; Caribbean manatees; American crocodiles; leatherback, loggerhead, Kemp's ridley and green sea turtles.

Coral reefs have been likened to the Amazon rainforest because of the rich array of life forms.

Potent medicines come from coral reefs. The drug Prialt, which is 100 times stronger than morphine, comes from cone snails there. Sponges from Florida Keys have been used to treat leukemia since 1969. And research from sponges led scientists to develop the AIDS drug AZT.

Ocean-derived pharmaceuticals are so important that Lilly, Merck, Pfizer, Hoffman-Roche and Bristol Myers Squibb have all established marine biology divisions.

Worldwide, coral reefs are our grandchildren's legacy.

Some of the dispersants and oil have entered the Loop Current -- a powerful conveyor belt that carries the warm Gulf of Mexico water through the Straits of Florida. It contains 80 times the volume of water of all rivers combined on Earth.

It then joins the Gulf Stream Current, which barrels past Miami carrying 28 million cubic metres of water per second. As it passes Georgia and South Carolina it triples its volume, and after it reaches Cape Hatteras, N.C., it heads out into the Atlantic toward the only open sea on the globe, the warm Sargossa Sea.

Eventually, the Gulf Stream becomes the North Atlantic Current destined for Western Europe, where its fan-like tendrils become the Norwegian Current.

The moment either the dispersant or the oil enter the Atlantic, the U.S. oil spill becomes global.

The solution to pollution is not dilution. Each time we lose one species we impoverish our planet. Spreading cancer-causing poisons throughout a marine ecosystem from the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic Ocean is not acceptable -- especially since these lessons were learned at the expense of Prince William Sound and the Pacific Ocean.

Reese Halter, an alumnus of St. John's Ravenscourt, where he was to give a public lecture Tuesday evening,

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