



About the Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill

The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has been estimated to be eight times larger than the Exxon Valdez oil spill, which occurred in 1989 (The Guardian, 2010) and was previously the largest spill on record.

The areas which have been impacted by the spill include the Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and Florida coastlines, which contain large areas of intertidal wetlands.

How is Oil Formed?

Oil is formed by heat and pressure deep below the earth's surface, from the remains of plants and animals that lived millions of years ago.

What is Oil Used For?

Oil has enhanced and made our lives more comfortable and easier over the years, yet it has a negative impact when it is released into our environment. Oil is used for many things like fueling cars, trucks and planes. We heat our homes with fuel and it is used to make things like plastics and medicines as well as for cooking. Transporting and producing oil can sometimes create air and water pollution like what has occurred in the Gulf of Mexico.

Even though petroleum products make our lives easier — finding, producing, moving, and using oil and oil derived products can harm the environment through air and water pollution.

Why Does an Oil Spill Occur?

An oil spill occurs when hydrocarbons (what makes up the oil) are spilt into the environment due to human activity. In the case of the Gulf of Mexico, an explosion on the BP Deepwater Horizon Drilling



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Rig caused a leak from a subsea oil well which resulted in an oil spill. This has resulted in impacts to marine and coastal environments around the Gulf of Mexico.

Who / what has been effected by the Gulf of Mexico oil spill?

The intertidal (underwater at high tide) wetland areas provide critical habitat for fish and provide habitat for foraging seabirds. Oil pollution can affect food supplies, as well as breeding, which lead to population losses. The oil when it comes in contact, can damage the feathers of seabirds, which then cease to be waterproof. Migratory seabirds and intertidal waders at risk from the spill in the Gulf of Mexico include warblers, buntings, swallows and terns. The brown pelican, which is Louisiana's state bird, nests on the low-lying islands and, having been removed from the endangered species list last year, is another seabird which is at risk from the oil spill.

A total of 387 sea turtles have been verified from April 30th to June 12th within the designated spill area from the Texas/Louisiana border to Apalachicola, and there are now 52 sea turtles in rehabilitation centers around the country. These include 31 heavily-oiled sea turtles captured as part of the on-water rescue operation and 21 turtles that stranded alive (NOAA, 2010).

A total of 46 stranded or captured turtles have had visible evidence of external oil since verifications began on April 30, 2010 (NOAA, 2010). Other species at risk include marine mammals, which have breeding grounds within the Gulf of Mexico. From April 30 to June 12, 41 stranded dolphins have been verified in the designated spill area (NOAA, 2010).

Other issues that effect animals are: Birds can ingest the oil if their feathers are covered and they try to clean themselves. Animals can also get hypothermia, causing their body temperature to be really



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low and can be blinded and not be able to see, which affects their ability to forage for food and avoid predators.

Not only are species and their habitats affected, but also people who live in the area of an oil spill can be impacted, including impacts to commercial and recreational fishermen. The area is being closely monitored to protect people's health and compensation is being paid to protect people's livelihoods.

Factors That We Need to Consider when Cleaning up an Oil Spill?

- Weather.
- The type and amount of oil spilled.
- The type of clean-up techniques (skimming, dispersants, burning)
- What types of animals live in the area.

How Can the Oil Spill be Stopped / Cleaned up?

Chemical dispersants (substances used to make oil more water soluble) are being used to disperse the oil into the environment to stop it from reaching the US coastline. Dispersants are applied to the surface of the water, as well as subsurface, before the oil reaches the surface.

The US Environmental Protection Agency are monitoring the air, water, sediment and native animals to make sure that the impact of the spill is understood and measures are put in place to try and manage any impacts of the spill on the marine environment. To facilitate the removal of heavy oil that is coming ashore, the clean-up team has increased skimming and beach cleanup activities and is preparing to move to 24-hour cleanup operations. More than 400 skimmers are currently deployed to remove an oil-water mix from the Gulf (NOAA, 2010).



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Reference: The Guardian (2010). Environment BP oil spill. The Guardian. (NOAA 12 June 2010).

Other oil clean up methods in the water are:

- A boom can be placed around the tanker that is spilling oil to collect the oil off the water.
- Airplanes can drop chemicals into the ocean to help break down the oil.

Some methods of cleaning up oil on beaches are:

- High or low pressure hoses can be used to spray the oil to collect it.
- Vacuum trucks can vacuum up the oil.
- Shovels or road equipment can collect oil off the beach.

What should you do if you see an injured animal or an animal / area covered in oil?

Do not touch the animal or the area covered in oil or any other unnatural substance. Always call a responsible adult or the appropriate authorities directly. Call '000' in Australia and '911' in America if there is no animal expert near by.

What Can You Do To Help?

- Using less oil means less oil is needed and therefore, less oil needs to be produced and transported. Promote clean energy like solar, wind and hydroelectric power.
- Organize a fundraiser to help raise money for the victims (animals, people and environment) of the current oil spill.
- Contact your local and federal governments with your thoughts about the oil spill and what can be done. Start a petition to have stronger regulations.
- Encourage and educate others in your community about how they can help the environment.