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BP Oil Spill: A Different Twist

By Steve Bakke March 5, 2020

qWe all remember the 2010 British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the northern Gulf of Mexico. A new study concludes that the "toxic extent" of that spill was larger than previously thought.

I'm neither supporting nor taking issue with that report but I am offering caution that those conclusions are based on "models," and models are notorious for their low accuracy level. Models are susceptible to human judgement and error. They should be one of several resources used, but never the sole "go to" authority when studying complex issues. Let's not rely on them exclusively, a habit of many studying the climate change issue.

Deepwater Horizon was a tragedy and environmental disaster of major proportions. The visible environmental impact was magnified by the spill's location in the extreme north of the Gulf of Mexico, very near the shores of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and the Florida panhandle.

There's one thing that I find puzzling. Starting soon after the spill, some experts wondered where all the oil had gone, and if the many underwater plumes that were speculated to be hiding deep under the Gulf's surface might not be consistent with the relative volume of the spill. I became interested in answering this question: "How big was the "pile" of oil that spilled from the Deepwater Horizon?"

I found an article that compared the volume of the spilled oil to the size of Yew York City's Empire State Building. I didn't believe those claims and decided to do an independent analysis using another office building I'm more familiar with. I chose the IDS Center in my hometown of Minneapolis, and proceeded to develop some measurements I could relate to.

The IDS Center is 57 floors high and the full complex covers an entire average size city block. The complex consists of a Tower that is 792 feet high, and along with that, a shorter hotel, bank, retail, restaurants and an enclosed courtyard. The current consensus is that 210 million gallons of oil were spilled during those tragic 87 days. Much to my surprise, all

of the oil spilled in the 2010 Gulf disaster would fit into the IDS Center – just one major building in this mid-size city!

Try to comprehend the following. The Gulf holds 660 quadrillion (1,000 trillion) gallons. Therefore, the spill compares to only about .00000003% of the gulf's volume. If you can't relate to that, think about yourself sitting in a room that's 10 feet by 12 feet with a 7-foot ceiling. The volume of the room represents the Gulf of Mexico. If someone said: "Hey, there's an oil leak over there in the corner" and if you looked, what would you see? Nothing at all. The proportionate spill would be approximately .0005 cubic inch – that's virtually microscopic.

This is an important topic that I found interesting, informative, and a welcome relief from the things about which I've recently been writing. The spill was a devastating and disastrous event. And its effects are still being discovered. But we should always remember that unless an emergency is kept in proper perspective, demagogues will be created, and incorrect conclusions arrived at.

The Gulf of Mexico is massive and mother nature has given it phenomenal resiliency. The spill consisted of "light crude", not the "heavy crude" as was the Valdez spill in Alaska. Light crude is subject to dilution and evaporation, is susceptible to chemical dissipation, and mother nature is its natural enemy. Over the millennia, microorganisms evolved which thrive on the oil that leaks naturally from the bottom of the oil-rich Gulf. These little parasites have been eating well for ten years. I hope they've been raising big families because, as we're learning, future oil spills are a certainty.

I'm neither a scientist nor a mathematician. I'm just someone whose interested in learning more about this oil spill. Maybe wannabe pundits like me are the only ones who would value going through this exercise.

Now, what am I going to do with this information?

I guess I just did it.