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LIFE AFTER BP

THE GULF COAST FIGHTS FOR A HEALTHY FUTURE

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PUBLISHER
Chris Kromm

EDITORIAL DIRECTOR
Sue Sturgis

EDITORIAL INTERN
Purity Kimaiyo

ART DIRECTOR
Jan Martell

COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR
Jerimee Richir

OFFICE COORDINATOR
Jennie Renner-Yeomans

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COVER PHOTO: Jolie Van Gilder, left, holds her mother's hand during a rally against BP and the Gulf oil spill in New Orleans in May 2010. *(AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)*

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Just over 40 years ago, a band of civil rights veterans, filled with hope and a vision of a better South, founded the Institute for Southern Studies.

From the beginning, the Institute's mission has been clear: To expose powerful interests who stand in the way of progress, and to give voice to Southerners from all walks of life who strive for a more just, peaceful and sustainable future.

Today, we have an array of new tools to carry out our mission: our online magazine Facing South, Facebook and Twitter together reach over 50,000 Southerners and South-watchers.

And we have Southern Exposure, the Institute's award-winning magazine. Since 1973, SE has earned a national reputation for in-depth investigative reports and innovative, unconventional coverage of the South.

Southern Exposure's coverage has often been way ahead of its time: In 2007, the Columbia Journalism Review credited Southern Exposure with breaking the story about the increasingly shaky subprime mortgage industry—four years earlier.

The economic devastation caused by the mortgage meltdown affected many nonprofits and publishers, including the Institute and SE, causing us to suspend the print magazine's publication. With this issue, we are excited to resume our twice-yearly publication schedule.

It's fitting that we re-launch with an issue focused on the Gulf Coast, a place that brings into sharp relief the hazards of chronic poverty and inequality, as well as the good work carried out by countless "accidental activists" and others struggling for change.

You, our readers, make the Institute and SE's vital work possible. If you haven't yet, please consider making a tax-deductible contribution today to the Institute Investigative Fund. Whether its $25 or $250, every bit makes a difference. Just go online to www.southernstudies.org or send your contribution to ISS, P.O. Box 531, Durham, N.C. 27702.

Together, we can build a stronger voice for change in the South.

Chris Kromm

Chris Kromm, Publisher

CELEBRATING FORTY YEARS OF CHANGE (left to right): Ajamu Dillahunt, co-chair of the Institute for Southern Studies board of directors; Rev. Lennox Yearwod of the Hip Hop Caucus; and ISS Executive Director Chris Kromm at our 40th anniversary party in March 2011. (*Photo by Sydney Hess*)

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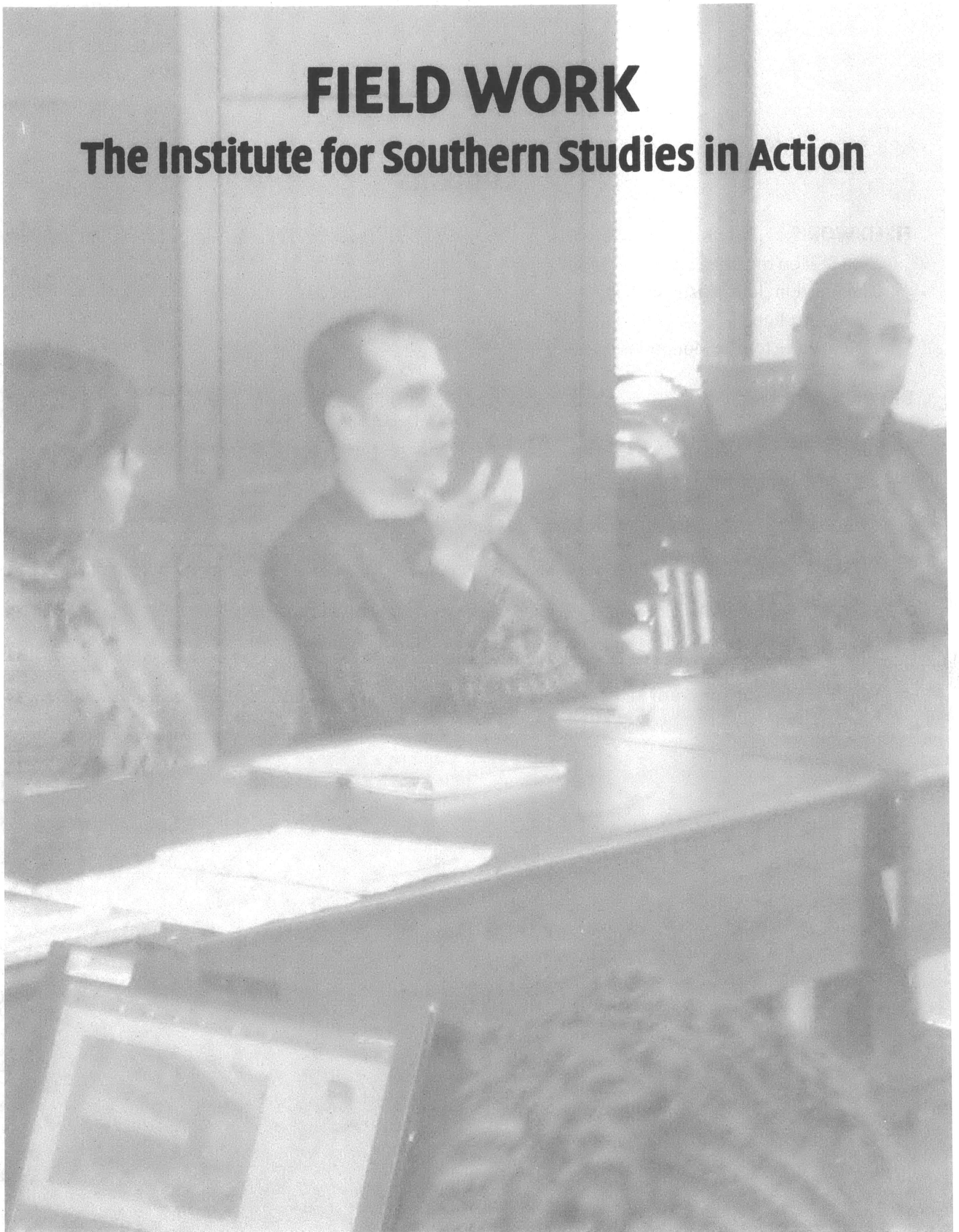
(Photo by U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Ann Marie Gorden)



FIELD WORK
The Institute for Southern Studies in Action

EYES STILL ON THE PRIZE

Institute celebrates 40 years of change in the South

Investigative reporters and community activists are a serious, high-minded bunch—but who says they can't have a good time?

More than a hundred friends of the Institute for Southern Studies certainly had a ball at our 40th Anniversary bash on Saturday, March 26, an event that celebrated the Institute's four decades of work for a better South—and looked to the next 40 years of change.

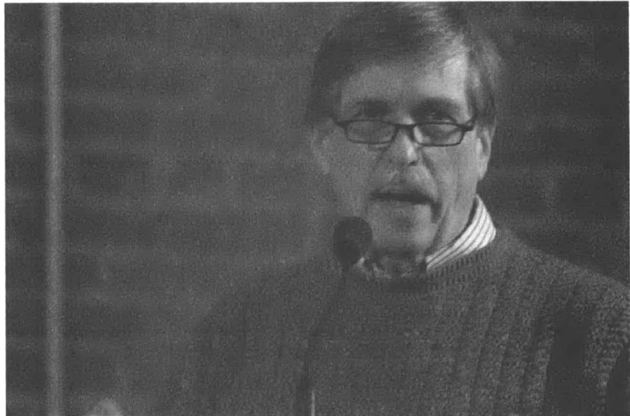
Eric Bates, executive editor of Rolling Stone—which has been in the news lately for its landmark investigations into the financial crisis and the U.S. war in Afghanistan—spoke passionately of the need for a fearless independent media that can keep those in power honest.

Bates won a National Magazine Award while editor of Southern Exposure in the late 1980s and early '90s, and he said SE and Facing South, the Institute's online magazine, still need reader support.

"The Institute keeps having to ask us to open our checkbooks," Bates said. "And we need to do it so they can continue their excellent work."

Bates also presented a Lifetime Achievement Award (not an Oscar, just the Institute version) to Bob Hall, who founded Southern Exposure in the early 1970s and pioneered a blend of investigative research and journalism at the Institute. Hall is now director of Democracy North Carolina, which has led the way in pushing for reforms to expand voting rights and lessen the influence of money in politics.

Rev. Lennox Yearwood, Louisiana native and president of the national Hip Hop Caucus, fired up the crowd with a reminder of the new challenges we face in the South. Civil rights veterans like those who founded the Institute may have defeated Jim Crow, but we face a new danger—what Rev. Yearwood calls "James Crow Jr., Esquire"—that will require even more determined action.



HONORING INSTITUTE HISTORY: Bob Hall, who founded Southern Exposure magazine in 1973 and today directs the election watchdog group Democracy North Carolina, was honored for his "lifelong commitment to justice, democracy and change in the South." *(Photo by Sydney Hess)*

"James Crow Jr., Esquire is more sophisticated," Rev. Yearwood warned, pointing to the economic and environmental threats facing the South and country. "Now, we're not just fighting for equality, but for our very existence."

But Yearwood ended on a positive note: "We can turn this around, but it will take more of us than ever before. Don't agonize, organize!"

The evening closed with a great set by guitar legend Cool John Ferguson and beats from DJ Hunicutt.

As the one of the last attendees leaving the event said while raising her glass, "To the next 40 years!" Hear, hear!

Couldn't make it to the Institute's 40th bash? You can still make a contribution to the 40th Anniversary Campaign for the Institute Investigative Fund. Just use the form at the back of this issue or go online to www.southernstudies.org/40-years.html. Thank you!

THE FREEDOM JOURNALISM SCHOOL
Training the next generation of watchdog reporters

TEACHING WATCHDOG JOURNALISM (left to right): Paul Cuadros, Sue Sturgis, Eric Bates and Ron Nixon share investigative reporting tips at the Institute's Freedom Journalism School workshop in March. (*Photo by ISS*)

How does an aspiring journalist become an investigative reporter? Countless bloggers, students, "citizen reporters" and others may be interested in watchdog media, but don't know where to turn for training, mentoring and support.

Enter the Freedom Journalism School, a new Institute program that aims to train a network of new investigative journalists across the South. Modeled on the Freedom Schools of the civil rights movement, it will give grassroots journalists the tools, ideas and resources needed to make a difference.

On March 26, 2011, the Institute held its first Freedom Journalism School workshop, "How to Be a Watchdog Reporter," at the UNC School of Journalism.

The event was a hit: 22 community reporters and students from Duke, North Carolina Central University, North Carolina State University and UNC-Chapel Hill heard from an all- star panel about how and why to do public interest media.

The panel featured Eric Bates, executive editor at Rolling Stone magazine (and a former editor of Southern Exposure); Paul Cuadros at the UNC School of Journalism; Ron Nixon, also a former Southern Exposure writer and now a reporter with The New York Times; and Sue Sturgis, editorial director of Facing South/Southern Exposure.

Fiona Morgan, an Institute board member and research fellow at The New America Foundation, moderated.

Among the themes that came out of the lively workshop:

• It's critical to go beyond the "he said, she said" approach of many news outlets. "Don't just report what people say happened; dig deeper, question what you're being told, and find out the truth," said Eric Bates, who oversaw Rolling Stone's award-winning investigation into the Afghanistan war, which helped lead to the resignation of Gen. Stanley McChrystal.

• A great way to start, Sue Sturgis pointed out, is to develop a "beat" or area of expertise, where you can bring your passion and knowledge to bear on an issue—essential for standing out in today's crowded media environment.

• When investigating a person, company or institution, don't settle for using one or two sources, Paul Cuadros advised. There are a wealth of sources you can use to create a fuller picture—including interviews with people who can give telling details and context.

• Finally, Ron Nixon drove home the need to not just investigate the "what" but also the "why." If one part of town is getting more money than another, how did that happen? Who made the decisions? What's the history? "Laying out the facts is important, but you also need to show the patterns," Nixon said.

Everyone seemed hungry for more: When the workshop ended, the room stayed packed for a full hour as participants shared ideas, tips and strategies. The workshop is the first in a series of Freedom Journalism School events the Institute hopes to hold in the coming months; if you'd like to hear about future workshops or learn more about the program, email us at mediatraining@southernstudies.org.

WHO IS ART POPE?

An Institute investigation exposes the money man behind North Carolina's right-wing network—and his growing national power

Karl Rove. The billionaire Koch brothers. Grover Norquist. Today, many of the key operatives and money men behind the American conservative movement are almost household names.

But few have heard of Art Pope, a North Carolina retail millionaire who is one of the most influential benefactors of conservative causes and Republican politics in North Carolina—and increasingly, the country.

Beginning in October 2010, Facing South and the Institute for Southern Studies launched an investigative series looking at the scope and nature of Pope's political empire. The findings were eye-opening.

Art Pope is the key money source behind North Carolina conservatism—and a national model for how to shift the political debate to the right. According to the Institute/Facing South analysis of tax records, about 90 percent of the money backing the state's leading conservative groups flows from Pope's family foundation, which he runs. Pope himself is also installed on the board of directors of most of the groups.

Pope was key to fueling the Republican Party's takeover of the North Carolina legislature in 2010, the first time the GOP has controlled both chambers in over 100 years. The Institute/Facing South analysis showed how three groups backed by Pope—Americans for Prosperity, Civitas Action and Real Jobs NC—joined with Pope family members to spend over $2.2 million targeting two dozen key races last November. Republicans won 18 of the contests.

While staying out of the spotlight, Pope backs some of the right wing's most controversial causes. Pope's groups have worked closely with the Tea Party Express, whose leaders have been widely condemned for making racially-charged statements, and Pope's foundation has funded many groups that deny the scientific consensus about global climate change.

EXPOSING POPE: In addition to an online series investigating right-wing benefactor Art Pope, the Institute also collaborated with North Carolina's Independent Weekly on a widely-circulated special issue revealing his conservative political machine. *(Illustration by V.C. Rogers)*

The investigation was widely circulated in North Carolina political circles and covered by the Raleigh News & Observer, WRAL TV and other major media outlets. In the wake of the series, the N.C. Association of Educators even called for a boycott of the discount retail stores owned by Pope's Variety Wholesalers chain, which includes Roses and Maxway.

The series also highlighted the growing influence of corporate money in politics—especially at the state level—in the wake of the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision, which loosened rules on corporate spending in elections.

What do Art Pope and other corporate leaders have in store for the 2012 elections? Stay tuned, the Institute and Facing South will be watching.

To read our ongoing investigative series on Art Pope and money in politics, visit www.southernstudies.org.

A NEW VOICE FOR THE MOUNTAINS

Institute sponsors nonprofit news source for in-depth, investigative journalism in Western North Carolina

Angie Newsome, a native of the N.C. mountains and former reporter for the Asheville Citizen-Times, launched Carolina Public Press in spring 2011. *(Photo by Carolina Public Press)*

We've all heard the story: Newspapers are slashing their budgets. Blogs and social media are taking over the media.

But where does the public turn for in-depth, investigative reporting crucial to staying informed and holding the powerful accountable?

More and more, it's places like Carolina Public Press, a new nonprofit journalism operation in the North Carolina mountains that launched this spring.

The Institute is sponsoring the venture, which aims to produce "high-quality, well-researched news and information about the overlooked or under-reported people, places and issues important to our region, the 17 westernmost counties of North Carolina."

Currently, there are only three daily newspapers serving the growing North Carolina mountain region, complemented by some two dozen weekly papers that focus on local news.

Those sources are important, but as Carolina Public Press founder and editor Angie Newsome, formerly an award-winning reporter for the Asheville Citizen-Times, says in her welcoming essay:

> [T]here is also a demand for Carolina Public Press. Public interest reporting isn't a luxury. We believe you want non-partisan, fair and balanced journalism, the kind that holds government officials and others in positions of power accountable to the citizens and communities they serve. We're here to delve deep into issues ranging from the environment to the economy, housing to healthcare. We're here to produce and publish stories that are more than soundbites, journalism with more than routine quotes and articles that are more than unmodified press releases.

The website has already made a mark, breaking stories on how deep budget cuts being mulled by the North Carolina legislature will uniquely impact mountain counties.

Carolina Public Press is the latest of several innovative media and community action initiatives incubated by the Institute. Other recent sponsored projects include People's Durham, a multi-racial community group focused on education justice in Durham, N.C., and the Raleigh Public Record, a public-interest reporting website in Raleigh, N.C.

Want to follow Carolina Public Press? Visit www.carolinapublicpress.org.

FACINGSOUTH

DAILY DISPATCHES FROM THE SOUTH:
If you like Southern Exposure, you'll love Facing South—the Institute's online magazine featuring investigative reports and new voices for change. Visit us today at www.southernstudies.org!

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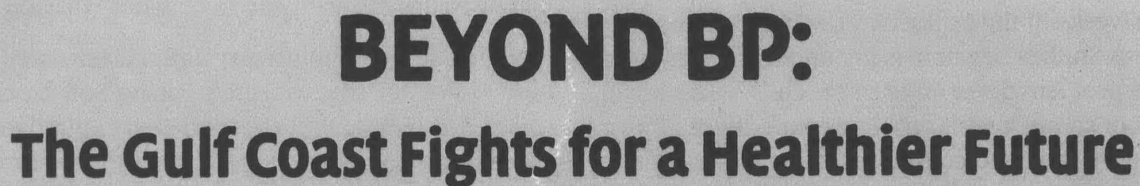


BEYOND BP:

The Gulf Coast Fights for a Healthier Future

"Already, this oil spill is the worst environmental disaster America has ever faced. And unlike an earthquake or a hurricane, it's not a single event that does its damage in a matter of minutes or days. The millions of gallons of oil that have spilled into the Gulf of Mexico are more like an epidemic, one that we will be fighting for months and even years."

— President Obama, Oval Office Address, June 15, 2010

When the BP Deepwater Horizon rig blew up off the Louisiana coast on April 20, 2010, it triggered what would turn out to be the worst oil spill in U.S. history, with almost 200 million gallons pouring into the Gulf of Mexico before the well was capped three months later.

Oil-covered pelicans and struggling fishing families became common symbols of the BP disaster, and the spill's devastating consequences on the environment and economy are still reverberating across the Gulf Coast.

Within weeks of the explosion, the Institute for Southern Studies began hearing about another, less-noticed problem developing in the Gulf: widespread reports of severe health problems experienced by cleanup workers and coastal residents. Many attributed them to the gushing crude, as well as smoke from efforts to burn off surface oil and the spraying of unprecedented amounts of chemical dispersants.

With few of these disturbing stories making it into the mainstream media, the Institute launched a project reporting on the disaster's environmental health implications. We contacted dozens of Gulf Coast community groups and government agencies looking into the spill's public health hazards.

We took two fact-finding trips to the region, once during the spill in 2010 and again eight months after the well was capped in 2011, to witness the problems for ourselves, speak with BP and government officials, and hear first-hand from Gulf residents affected, from Moss Point, Miss. to Grand Isle, La.

Our investigation found an unmistakable and growing body of evidence that Gulf Coast residents have been experiencing severe health problems in the wake of the BP disaster.

Public health experts say that many of these health problems are what is to be expected after severe chemical exposures. The symptoms are also similar to those suffered by cleanup workers and residents in Alaska after the 1989 Exxon Valdez tanker spill—and by Gulf residents on the receiving end of the massive pollution generated by the Gulf's oil and gas industry.

But our investigation also finds that BP and officials at all level of government have been slow to confront the evidence of widespread health problems in the Gulf Coast. They claim they are waiting for more research and hard evidence. But advocates blame the power of the Gulf energy lobby, which has spent millions of dollars over the last year to block action and reform.

The result: As the New Orleans Times-Picayune reported one year after the BP disaster, Congress has done "virtually nothing" to address the health and safety issues raised by the Deepwater Horizon spill.

On the one-year anniversary of the Deepwater Horizon explosion, the Institute's Facing South online magazine (www.southernstudies.org) published a five-part series about the public health concerns triggered by the disaster. We have refined, expanded and updated that series for this edition of Southern Exposure.

The BP disaster is far from over. We hope this investigation helps put the pressing need for full Gulf recovery back on the national radar. We also hope it gives voice to the many Gulf Coast residents struggling for a healthier future for their families and communities.

— Sue Sturgis and Chris Kromm

This investigation was made possible due to support from the Fund for Environmental Journalism, the Fund for Investigative Journalism and the Surdna Foundation, as well as many individual contributors to the Institute Investigative Fund. If you would like to support independent, investigative journalism, please consider making a tax-deductible contribution to the Fund today online at www.southernstudies.org or by mail to ISS, P.O. Box 531, Durham, NC 27702. Thank you!

Poisoned In The Gulf

A year after the BP oil catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico, cleanup workers and coastal residents say they are facing a public health crisis—and Washington isn't listening.

By Sue Sturgis

Supply vessels battle the fire that engulfed the Deepwater Horizon oil rig following the April 2010 explosion. *(Photo by U.S. Coast Guard)*

Clayton Matherne was just a quarter-mile from BP's Deepwater Horizon oil rig when it exploded into flames a year ago in the Gulf of Mexico, killing 11 workers, injuring 17 others and triggering the largest oil spill in U.S. history.

At the time, Matherne was a boat engineer for Guilbeau Marine, shipping supplies for rig workers. He struggles for words to describe what he witnessed that fateful night.

"It still gives me nightmares today," he says.

But on April 20, Matherne's nightmares were just beginning. Two days after the blast, Matherne, a resident of the small town of Lockport in Louisiana's Lafourche Parish, found himself back at the site of the disaster. BP contracted with Guilbeau Marine to help with the oil cleanup.

Less than an eighth of a mile from where Matherne was skimming oil, other contractors were trying to burn oil off the water's surface, unleashing massive plumes of black smoke into the air. Meanwhile, low-flying planes dumped chemical dispersants on the growing slick—and directly on Matherne and his fellow cleanup workers.

From the very beginning, Matherne says, he and other workers asked for basic safety equipment like chemical suits and respirators to protect them from the pollution surrounding them. BP refused to provide any.

Cleanup crews contracted by BP collect oily waste in Grand Isle, La. in May 2010. *(U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Ann Marie Gorden)*

"So we went and bought our own," Matherne says. "But BP told us that if we were caught using it, we were fired."

People from Louisiana to Florida are reporting unusual health problems that they blame on the oil spill and the chemical dispersants that were used in unprecedented amounts.

Almost immediately, Matherne and his fellow workers began experiencing severe headaches and breathing problems. Some workers passed out on the job. Matherne went to the emergency room and was diagnosed with "reactive airway disease secondary to chemical exposure" and sent back to work. Eventually Matherne began vomiting blood. His captain called the BP official overseeing the cleanup operations and told him he feared his employee was dying.

On May 30, 2010, Matherne was airlifted to shore and sent to an emergency clinic, where he says he was diagnosed with acute chemical poisoning. Today his blood still has high levels of dangerous toxins including benzene, arsenic, mercury and xylene—chemicals that commonly show up after exposure to crude oil. He was eventually transferred to a medical center in Houma, La., where he spent five days choking up blood. He was treated with high doses of steroids and released.

Today, Matherne's lungs are working at only a fraction of their capacity, and he experiences paralyzing headaches. He's losing control over his bodily functions and faces the possibility of having to wear diapers—a dispiriting prospect for a 35-year-old man who before the BP disaster trained as a power lifter and wrestler and prided himself on his physical strength.

"I can't even pick up a gallon of milk from the icebox now," he says. "My wife has to help me put on my shoes."

'SOMETHING I'VE NEVER SEEN'

Matherne's story is not an unusual one on the Gulf Coast a year after BP's oil disaster. An investigation by Southern Exposure finds that people across the region from Louisiana to Florida—cleanup workers as well as coastal residents who weren't directly involved in the cleanup—are reporting unusual health problems that they blame on the oil spill and the chemical dispersants that were used in unprecedented amounts.

Marylee Orr, executive director of the Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN), says she fields a couple of calls a day from people who say they were exposed to BP oil and/or chemical dispersants, and who now report an array of health problems, including respiratory and gastrointestinal disorders, blurred vision, rashes and other skin conditions, bleeding from the rectum and ears, and bloody urine.

Following Hurricane Katrina, Orr's group assisted cleanup workers who experienced health impacts from exposure to chemicals and pathogens churned up by the storm, but she says those problems pale in scope and severity to what is unfolding now.

"It is something I've never seen," Orr says. "And I've been doing this work for 25 years."

Among the mounting pieces of evidence that the BP spill has unleashed a new set of public health threats in the Gulf:

• Preliminary findings of a coastal survey last August by the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University found that over 40 percent of the population living within 10 miles of the affected coastal areas had experienced direct exposure to the oil spill, and that both adults and children directly exposed to the oil were twice as likely to report new physical or mental health issues as those who were not.

• A door-to-door survey of 954 households conducted across Southeast Louisiana from July through October of last year by the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, a grassroots environmental nonprofit, found that 46 percent of respondents reported being exposed to oil or dispersant, with 72 percent of those who believed they were exposed reporting at least one associated symptom. Residents reported a sudden onset of symptoms including nausea, dizziness and skin irritation — symptoms common from chemical exposures.

BP cleanup worker Clayton Matherne has suffered severe health problems that he blames on his exposure to the spill. "I can't even pick up a gallon of milk from the icebox now." *(Photo by Jeffrey Dubinsky)*

• In early 2011, LEAN released the results of tests performed on blood samples collected from a dozen Gulf residents, fishers and cleanup workers who complained of health problems they believed to be related to the oil spill. All of those tested had high blood levels of ethylbenzene, a component of crude oil that causes respiratory and neurological problems as well as damage to the blood, liver and kidneys. Eleven of those tested had relatively high concentrations of xylenes, a chemical in oil linked to respiratory and neurological problems as well as organ damage, and four showed unusually high levels of benzene, a constituent of oil that is known to cause blood cancer and other serious health problems.

• A team of three scientific divers with the Baton Rouge, La.-based nonprofit EcoRigs who worked in the area near the BP oil spill site last summer report

that they began to develop unusual symptoms and by October quit diving, even though they were wearing full wetsuits. However, they have continued to suffer from health problems that include bloody stools, bleeding from the nose and eyes, nausea, diarrhea, stomach cramps, dizziness and confusion. They have had their blood tested, and elevated levels of ethylbenzene and xylene have been discovered.

An August 2010 survey found that more than 40% of the population living within 10 miles of the coast had experienced direct exposure to the spill, and were twice as likely to report new physical or mental health issues as those who were not exposed.

• A number of people who swam in Gulf waters during the oil spill have since stepped forward to talk about long-term health problems they believe are related to their exposure to the oil and/or chemical dispersants. They include Florida resident Paul Doomm, who was a healthy 22-year-old about to join the Marine Corps when he swam on an open beach off the Florida Panhandle early last summer. By July 2010, he began suffering severe headaches, and by Thanksgiving he was paralyzed on the left side of his body and suffered seizures. He was diagnosed with brain lesions. Meanwhile, Mississippi resident Steven Aguinaga reports that since swimming at Fort Walton Beach in Florida last July he began suffering from chronic chest pain, bloody urine and vomiting. A 33-year-old friend who went swimming with him and then went to work on the BP cleanup also got sick and died suddenly in August.

BP spill-related health problems have also been a leading topic of discussion at various public forums held to discuss the disaster. During a meeting in New Orleans in January to discuss the report released by the National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, many Gulf residents described lingering health concerns. Attendees extracted a promise from Commissioner Francis Beinecke of the Natural Resources Defense Council to take their concerns back to the White House. Health concerns also came up repeatedly during a February 2011 meeting of the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force in New Orleans.

In March 2011, John Jopling—an attorney with the nonprofit Mississippi Justice Center—attended a town hall meeting in Bay St. Louis, Miss., one of a series organized by state Attorney General Jim Hood.

"We were all blown away by what we heard there," Jopling reports. "Nothing prepared me for it."

Jopling expected to hear complaints about BP's complex and frustrating claims process. Instead, person after person spoke about health problems they attributed to the spill and/or dispersants; some even brought blood test results confirming toxic exposures. Three men told strikingly similar stories about their experiences scouting oil for BP after the spill and then developing a chronic blistering, peeling skin condition on their arms. All said they had difficulty finding a doctor willing to treat them.

Attorney General Hood also seemed surprised. "One of the things that kind of startled me are the people that are concerned about breathing in the fumes, particularly last summer, the effects from it," Hood later told Mississippi Public Broadcasting. "Many are having effects and there are no doctors here that can really analyze whether it may be as a result of this oil explosion."

After the March 2011 forum, Hood said he would look into having the state health department or the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention do some testing in the area.

A LACK OF OPTIONS

That a leading Gulf state official was merely considering the possibility of contacting federal health authorities nearly a year after the BP disaster underscores what many see as a breakdown in the government's public health response to the disaster.

The federal government's own BP spill commission noted the shortcomings in the ability of current law to address such hazards, recommending that the government be given more power to monitor health impacts. The report also called for long-term tracking of responders' health and community health in the most affected coastal areas, calling such efforts "warranted and scientifically important." Indeed, last September the National Institutes of Health announced that it was undertaking a $20 million study looking at potential impacts of the BP spill on cleanup workers.

"However," the commission report states, "the focus on long-term research cannot overshadow the need to provide immediate medical assistance to affected communities, which have suffered from limited access to healthcare services," adding that the Gulf's health care infrastructure was badly damaged by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The lack of medical options for the BP spill victims is a reality familiar to Clayton Matherne, who—like others in the wake of the disaster—has had a hard time finding a doctor willing to treat him. He says several hung up the phone as soon as he said he got sick doing cleanup work for BP. He figures they didn't want to get involved because of the possible legal implications.

Eventually he found Dr. Mike Robichaux of Raceland, La., an ear, nose and throat specialist and former state senator who has provided free care for people who believe they have been sickened by the BP spill. Robichaux has put Matherne on high doses of steroids in hopes of keeping his organs from shutting down, and he has referred him to a chemical illness specialist who plans to try detoxification therapy.

If that doesn't work, the doctors have given Matherne five years to live at most.

Like many others in the Gulf, Matherne has channeled his anger and frustration into advocacy, joining a grassroots movement demanding that officials pay attention to widespread reports of health impacts from the disaster. Matherne is speaking out at public hearings, showing up at press conferences and telling his story to anyone who will listen.

"These companies took my life from me," Matherne says. "The thing that keeps me going every day is that I'm pissed off."

Contractors work to clean oil waste from the beach in Galeston, Texas in July 2010. (*U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Prentice Danner*)

A Regulatory Disaster

Following the BP oil disaster, federal agencies may have further compromised the health of cleanup workers and Gulf Coast residents.

By Sue Sturgis and Chris Kromm

By September 2010, an unprecedented amount of oil dispersant—more than 2 million gallons, according to BP—had been sprayed near the Deepwater Horizon disaster site. (*U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Adrian Cadiz*)

When BP's Deepwater Horizon oil rig blew in the Gulf, Riki Ott, a marine toxicologist from Alaska, had a sinking feeling: Here we go again.

Ott was touring the United States to promote her book *Not One Drop*, the story of what until then had been the nation's worst oil spill—the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster, which unleashed up to 32 million gallons of crude oil into Alaska's Prince William Sound.

Back then, Ott was working as a commercial salmon fisher in the area. She responded by writing about the environmental and social fallout of the disaster and founding several nonprofits to help Alaskan communities deal with the impact.

When BP's failed rig began gushing oil into the Gulf, Ott's first instinct was to turn away. "I didn't want to go," Ott told Southern Exposure. "It hurt too much."

But Ott managed to stay away for only 10 days. She quickly became convinced that many of the post-spill mistakes made in Alaska were being repeated in the Gulf—and putting the health of thousands of coastal residents in jeopardy.

Over the last year, Ott has been crisscrossing the Gulf, collecting stories from hundreds of people from Florida to Louisiana. These conversations have led her to believe there is an environmental health crisis unfolding in the Gulf that was exacerbated by the federal government's failure to take appropriate action to protect cleanup workers and coastal residents.

"There are a lot of sick people in the Gulf, with reports of respiratory problems, skin rashes and other issues that won't go away," Ott says. "The federal government has done a huge disservice by pretending this isn't a problem."

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

Exhibit A of the government's failure to address the public health aftermath of the BP disaster, Ott and others contend, is the medical problems now afflicting many of the workers mobilized to clean up the spill.

According to the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, which is part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), about 100,000 people went through cleanup worker safety training in response to the BP disaster. Currently the agency is studying the possible impacts of the BP spill on cleanup workers.

However, that research is geared toward helping prepare for future incidents, rather than helping those who may have been harmed after the Gulf catastrophe.

The reported illnesses should have come as no surprise: People who were involved in the Exxon Valdez cleanup two decades ago reported a flu-like respiratory illness that was dubbed "Valdez Crud," the symptoms of which—coughing, burning eyes, chest pain, etc.—are consistent with exposure to toxic chemicals found in crude oil.

Over time, many Exxon Valdez cleanup workers say they developed more chronic conditions, including memory loss and cancer, which they contend are likely consequences of long-term chemical exposure.

Though there were no published, peer-reviewed health studies of Exxon Valdez cleanup workers, an unpublished pilot study by a Yale graduate student in 2003 included a phone survey of 169 of those workers that found those with significant oil exposure or exposure to oil fumes were more likely to report symptoms of chronic airway disease than those with less exposure.

People who were involved in the Exxon Valdez cleanup two decades ago reported a flu-like respiratory illness that was dubbed "Valdez Crud," the symptoms of which are consistent with exposure to toxic chemicals.

Based on such findings, Ott told Congress that as many as 3,000 former Exxon Valdez cleanup workers suffer from spill-related health problems.

More recently, a study by Spanish scientists published last August in the Annals of Internal Medicine looking at fishermen who responded to a 2002 spill of 20 million gallons of oil from a tanker off the northwestern coast of Spain found that participation in the cleanup was associated with persistent respiratory problems such as coughing and shortness of breath.

The Spanish cleanup workers also showed chromosomal abnormalities in their white blood cells that increased with intensity of exposure.

These kinds of effects are just what public health experts would expect. One of the key components of crude oil, for example, is benzene, which the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), a division of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, say causes damage to the blood, immune system and reproductive organs, and can lead to leukemia.

LACKING A PLAN

Given what's known about the potential health impacts on cleanup workers, BP and federal officials seemed unprepared to address these threats in the face of the largest oil spill in history.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the federal agency in charge of protecting workers from on-the-job hazards, deployed personnel to the Gulf the week after the rig exploded. But even at the height of the cleanup effort, the cash-strapped agency had at most only 50 personnel assigned solely to the oil cleanup—far too few to comprehensively monitor a massive effort that stretched from Texas to Florida.

"There are a lot of sick people in the Gulf ... The federal government has done a huge disservice by pretending this isn't a problem."

OSHA also worked with the National Institute on Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), a division of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to establish rules regarding protective equipment and training for cleanup workers. But those rules were not always followed.

In July 2010, for example, OSHA officials sounded an alarm over shortcuts in the required 40-hour training for cleanup supervisors.

"We have received reports that some are offering this training in significantly less than 40 hours, showing video presentations and offering only limited instruction," U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health, Dr. David Michaels, announced last July.

Officials may also have been handcuffed by limitations in federal law. In 2010, the Center for Progressive Reform (CPR), a nonprofit watchdog group in Washington, D.C., released a report documenting the way the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 limits the role of agencies like OSHA and NIOSH in the oil spill planning process.

Passed by Congress in the wake of the Exxon Valdez disaster, the act creates a National Contingency Plan that gives OSHA inspection authority after a spill and a seat on national and regional response teams. However, the plan simply states that response actions should comply with OSHA standards—but doesn't set out any clear way to ensure the law is followed. As a consequence, the Center found, too few cleanup workers were given adequate training on the use of personal protective equipment.

Consider, for example, respirators. "When cleanup crews first got to work on the beaches and on the water, there was no carefully considered plan for what protections they needed for the oil fumes and heat," says CPR President Rena Steinzor, a professor at the University of Maryland School of Law.

DENIED PROTECTION

But a lack of training about how to use protective gear wasn't the only problem: In some cases, BP failed to even make gear available.

Kellie Fellows was one of hundreds of workers hired by BP to help clean up beaches in Mississippi last summer, and she later shared her story about her experience with the Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN). During training Fellows and her co-workers were told that safety was a priority and that they would be provided with respirators and other protective gear.

But when it was time to go to work, there were no respirators provided—even though there was a strong smell of oil on the beach. Initially they were given Tyvek protective suits to wear but were instructed to pull them up only partway and to tie the arms around their waists.

Eventually they were told there was no danger—and instead of suits, they were only given straw hats, safety glasses and gloves and sent to work.

One of the key components of crude oil causes damage to the blood, immune system and reproductive organs, and can lead to leukemia.

Fellows' job was to hold a trash bag while two men shoveled in tar balls and to tie off the bag in a knot, a task that caused her bare arms to repeatedly touch the oil-smeared bag. Eventually her arms became covered with oil, which also worked its way down inside her gloves. Her skin began burning.

"I wanted to be in a Tyvek [suit]," she told LEAN. "And they refused."

When she reported the contamination to her superiors at BP, no one seemed to know what to do. They ended up washing her hands with soap and bottled water, rubbing on a couple packets of burn cream,

and sending her home for the rest of the day.

Fellows has been left with lingering headaches that she attributes to the toxic exposures, and she believes many others are still experiencing health-damaging consequences—even though the managers denied the clean-up had anything to do with it.

"Everyone was given excuses," Fellows says. "Oh, you have the flu, it's going around, that kind of thing. Bronchial issues? Oh, well, it's allergies. Every excuse known to man was given except for them to actually say this is coming from the oil."

Louis Bayhi, a Louisiana charter boat captain, heard the same story after he was hired by BP to shuttle divers and scientists to the spill site, and later worked for BP's Vessels of Opportunity program in direct cleanup.

Bayhi says he was told he didn't have to wear a respirator since he wouldn't be directly touching the oil, though he says the fumes still sickened him and his crew. Two co-workers passed out on his boat, were taken for emergency treatment, and never returned. He still doesn't know what happened to them.

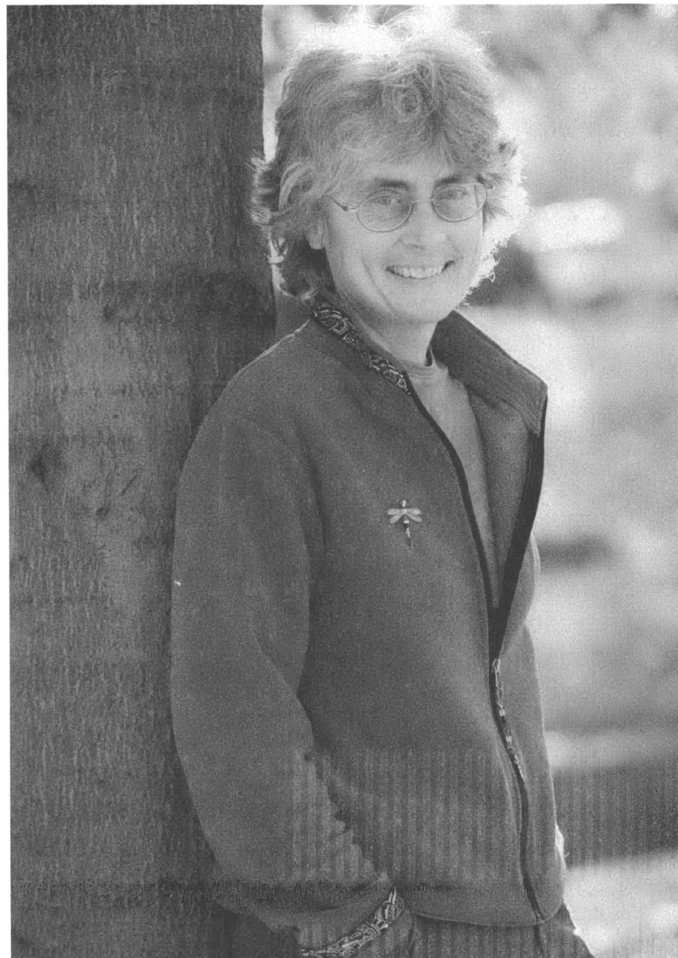
When crews would arrive back at shore, Bayhi says, BP medical staff would ask them how they were feeling. When they described headaches and other problems, they were told they must be seasick.

"I've been offshore pretty much all my life and I got sick one time because I ate Froot Loops and beer for breakfast," he said in a speech recorded by LEAN. "Other than that, I really don't remember a time I got seasick."

Seasickness doesn't continue onshore for months on end—but Bayhi's symptoms have. In April 2011, he spent five days in the hospital with severe abdominal pain. The doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with him, but he suspects it was related to his oil exposure.

Environmental health advocates say the kind of exposures cleanup workers suffered is unthinkable in this day and age.

"The workplace environment cleanup people were put in was totally unacceptable for 2010," Wilma Subra, an environmental chemist who works with LEAN, told Southern Exposure. "You had a responsible party with resources, and it should not have happened."



Marine toxicologist Riki Ott, who experienced the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill first-hand, has collected stories from across the Gulf that lead her to believe the BP disaster is causing an environmental health crisis. (*Photo courtesy of* Riki Ott)

'HUMAN HEALTH HAZARDS: ACUTE'

Adding to the toxic stew in the Gulf—and the health risks to cleanup workers and coastal residents—was BP's government-approved plan to disperse massive oil slicks after the spill.

Oil dispersants are a mix of surfactants and industrial solvents that cause oil to form into droplets and fall to the ocean floor. Less than a month after the Deepwater Horizon explosion, BP reported spraying more than 400,000 gallons of dispersant on the slick and wellhead itself—primarily two versions of Corexit, manufactured by Illinois-based Nalco.

Corexit EC9500A and Corexit EC9527A were both on the list of 18 dispersants approved for use on oil spills by the Environmental Protection Agency. However, as The New York Times reported in a May 2010

story titled "Less Toxic Dispersants Lose Out in BP Oil Spill Cleanup," the EPA's own data showed that Corexit was far more toxic—and far less effective—than other alternatives in handling southern Louisiana crude:

> Of 18 dispersants whose use EPA has approved, 12 were found to be more effective on southern Louisiana crude than Corexit, EPA data show. Two of the 12 were found to be 100 percent effective on Gulf of Mexico crude, while the two Corexit products rated 56 percent and 63 percent effective, respectively. The toxicity of the 12 was shown to be either comparable to the Corexit line or, in some cases, 10 or 20 times less, according to EPA.

Considered a trade secret, the precise contents of dispersants like Corexit were initially hidden from public view and only revealed to the Environmental Protection Agency in June 2010 after extensive negotiations. However, OSHA requires that any ingredients which may be harmful to exposed workers be listed on readily available Material Safety Data Sheets. For both forms of Corexit used by BP—Corexit EC9500A and EC9527A—the data sheets include this warning: "Human health hazards: acute."

For both forms of Corexit used by BP, the data sheets include this warning: "Human health hazards: acute."

OSHA's data sheet for Corexit EC9527A details the potential health consequences: "[E]xcessive exposure may cause central nervous system effects, nausea, vomiting, anesthetic or narcotic effects." It also notes that this version of Corexit includes 2-butoxyethanol, stating that "repeated or excessive exposure to butoxyethanol may cause injury to red blood cells (hemolysis), kidney or the liver ... Prolonged and/or repeated exposure through inhalation or extensive skin contact with EGBE [butoxyethanol] may result in damage to the blood and kidneys."

By September 2010, BP reported spraying about 2 million gallons of dispersants for the Deepwater Horizon spill—an unprecedented amount. And some Gulf scientists believe there is already strong evidence that it is having adverse health impacts.

In July 2010, Dr. Susan Shaw, founder and director of the Marine Environmental Research Institute in Maine, appeared on a special CNN report to tell about a shrimper whose skin had been splashed with Gulf water:

> ...[H]e got a headache that lasted for three weeks. He had heart palpitations. He had muscle spasms and ... bleeding from the rectum.
>
> And that's what Corexit does. It ruptures red blood cells, causes internal bleeding, and liver and kidney damage.
>
> This stuff is so toxic combined [with oil] ... it goes right through skin.

As with the risks of severe oil exposure, the hazards posed by Corexit were already known. The United Kingdom had famously banned the used of the dispersant. A version of Corexit was also used after the Exxon Valdez disaster and implicated by cleanup workers and environmental advocates for the health problems many suffered after that disaster.

Even when faced with growing criticism about the use of such toxic elements on such an untested scale—especially near cleanup workers and coastal communities—government regulators appeared slow to address the hazards.

On May 26, 2010—just over a month after the disaster began—the EPA and U.S. Coast Guard issued a directive telling BP to stop using surface dispersants, except in "rare cases where there may have to be an exception." Yet as Rep. Edward Markey (D-Mass.) noted in a strongly worded July 30 letter sent to Adm. Thad Allen, the spill recovery commander, exemptions were being routinely granted:

> An analysis of the exemption request letters submitted by both the BP and Houma Unified Command, as well as other documents provided to me by the USCG, reveals that since the Directive was issued on May 26th, more than 74 exemption requests have been submitted and, usually within the same day, approved by the USCG. On 5 separate occasions BP submitted requests for pre-authorized exemptions to deviate from EPA and USCG instructions by applying 6,000 gallons of dispersant per day to the ocean surface for an entire week ... In every instance this weekly request was approved by the USCG, and on many of these days, BP still used more than double its new 6,000 gallon limit.

The result? Dispersant use declined only 9 percent—even after federal officials had formally directed BP to stop using them in all but the most extreme circumstances.

Aside from the threats posed by immediate exposure, there is concern about the long-term impact of dispersants on the Gulf ecosystem. In May of this year, scientists at the University of West Florida released preliminary findings that, when mixed with oil, Corexit is toxic to phytoplankton and bacteria, the foundation of the food chain—and they said the toxic effect may "cascade" up the chain to larger organisms. The findings of their study, which was funded by BP, also contradicted the company's claim that dispersants speed up the breakdown of oil by naturally occurring bacteria.

Meanwhile, there have been reports that dispersants were still being used long after the spraying was supposed to have stopped.

In August 2010, a month after the Joint Command for the oil spill had announced the end of dispersant spraying, Rocky Kistner with the Natural Resources Defense Council documented the presence of large tanks of Corexit on Gulf beaches. In early 2011, an MSNBC report gave detailed accounts of Gulf residents who saw dispersants being sprayed long after July, with C-130s spraying within sight of beaches at night.

"I have received hundreds of reports about improper spraying," says Wilma Subra of the group LEAN. "It was ongoing, and people are being made very, very sick."

Subra says she has passed the reports she's received about the spraying to the EPA. However, the agency has refused to discuss the matter with her, saying only that it's part of an ongoing criminal investigation.

JUST FOUR JUMBO SHRIMP A WEEK

Another potential health risk for people in the Gulf Coast and beyond is the safety of the region's seafood.

At a press conference in September 2010, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administrator Jane Lubchenco declared that seafood from the Gulf was "free of contamination." NOAA echoed the sentiment this past April, when it led reporters on a tour of testing facilities in Mississippi and declared that "not one piece of tainted seafood has entered the market" due to the BP spill, according to the Biloxi Sun Herald.

But as Subra points out, test data from the federal government and state agencies contradicted at least the earlier assertions. Twenty-four percent of all Gulf seafood and 43 percent of Gulf oysters sampled through August 2010 contained polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), a natural constituent of crude oil and a byproduct of burning fuel. The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry reports that PAHs are known to cause cancer, as well as birth defects and damage to the skin and immune system.

While the concentrations detected fell far below the levels of concern established by the Food and Drug Administration, those levels are another source of controversy.

To set its safe consumption levels for Gulf seafood in the wake of the BP oil spill, the FDA measured the levels of PAHs in the seafood against the national average of seafood consumption—about 3 ounces a week. That's the equivalent of four jumbo shrimp.

But the typical Gulf Coast family—especially in fishing communities—eats much more seafood than that. A survey in late 2010 by the Natural Resources Defense Council of 547 seafood eaters in the Gulf found the median consumption was about 20 seafood meals a month. Those at the higher end consumed up to 60 seafood meals a month. And their portions were bigger than just four jumbo shrimp.

"Those levels are clearly not designed to deal with the situation on the Gulf Coast," says Subra. "It's not protective enough."

What's more, the estimate is based on the person eating the seafood weighing an average of 176 pounds. What about children? People who weigh less? Pregnant women and their developing fetuses? Federal and state health officials insist their measures are conservative and adequate to protect the public. However, environmental health advocates point out that the FDA itself has applied conflicting standards, using local fish consumption rates to calculate safe limits in the wake of the Exxon Valdez disaster, but switching to less accurate national measures after the BP disaster.

Meanwhile, LEAN has been conducting its own tests of seafood from the Gulf, looking at PAHs as well as total petroleum hydrocarbons, which the FDA is not testing for. LEAN intentionally tested only seafood that appeared pristine and neither looked nor smelled suspicious.

LEAN found that levels of total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPHs) in flounder and speckled trout caught in Louisiana's St. Bernard Parish last August were

21,575 milligrams per kilogram, while oysters caught in Plaquemines Parish showed levels of 12,500 mg/kg. Petroleum levels found in fiddler crabs and periwinkles harvested from Terrebonne Parish on Aug. 19 were 6,916 mg/kg.

Are those levels safe? The federal government does not set acceptable levels for TPHs but instead calculates safe consumption limits for oil components such as benzene and toluene. But Paul Orr of LEAN says that after talking with researchers and a toxicologist, his group believes that there should be no detectable levels of TPH in seafood.

The prospect of contaminated seafood continues today: At a public meeting held in March 2011 in Grand Isle, La. as part of the Natural Resource Damage Assessment process that's now underway, shrimpers reported pulling up nets full of oil from the seafloor and facing the decision of whether to report the oil to the Coast Guard, which would mean throwing away the day's catch, or keeping quiet.

Subra is among those who aren't taking any chances.

"I don't eat seafood now from the Gulf or from coastal areas," she confesses. "I still eat crawfish, but that's freshwater."

WHERE DOES THE OIL WASTE GO?

Under BP's government-approved disposal plan, low income and people of color communities in the South have ended up with a disproportionate share of the Gulf's cleaned-up oil.

By Robert D. Bullard

Cleanup workers put oil spill waste collected in plastic bags into containers for landfill disposal. *(Photo by U.S. Environmental Protection Agency)*

After the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster, the media devoted round-the-clock coverage to the well capping and cleanup efforts. But not much attention was given to where BP oil spill waste was being disposed. After the Environmental Protection Agency approved BP's waste management plan in mid-June 2010, environmental justice leaders were the first to raise concerns that the plan would turn low-income and people of color communities in the Gulf Region into the dumping grounds for BP oil waste.

Although people of color make up about 26 percent of the coastal counties in Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, and Louisiana, most of the oil waste was slated to be sent to these communities under BP's government-approved plan. On July 15, 2010—the earliest reporting period—39,399 tons of oil waste went to nine landfills; of that amount, 21,867 tons (55.4 percent) were disposed in communities where a majority of residents are people of color, and 30,338 tons (77 percent) of oil waste went to communities where the percent people of color was greater than the overall rate in the host county.

A year after the disaster, the pattern continued. As of April 10, 2011, 106,409 tons of BP waste went to 11 landfills, of which 45,032 tons (42.3 percent) went to landfills in majority people of color communities, and 90,554 tons (85.1 percent) went to landfills located in communities whose percent people of color population exceeded the county's percent people of color.

These communities not only must contend with the negative impacts of being on the fence line with oil waste landfills, but also face environmental health threats from increased truck traffic and vehicle emissions, especially from diesel trucks.

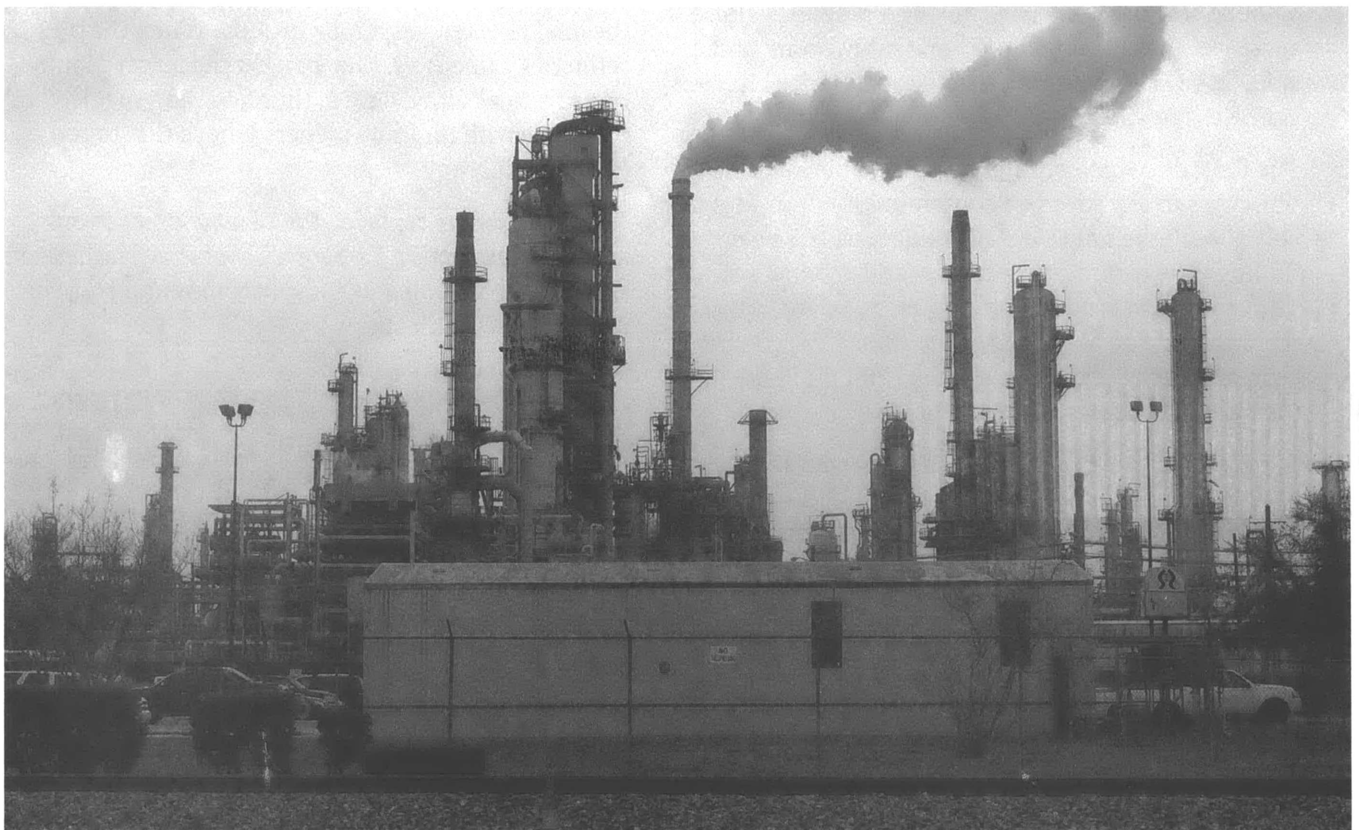
These residents are invisible and forgotten Americans —another injustice that needs to be corrected.

Robert D. Bullard directs the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University. His most recent book is Environmental Health and Racial Equity in the United States. *A version of this piece originally appeared at OpEdNews.com.*

Chronic Exposure

Long before the BP disaster, the Gulf energy industry had been a persistent threat to community health.

By Sue Sturgis



The Chalmette Refinery in Louisiana's St. Bernard Parish is a major source of toxic pollution. It's jointly owned by ExxonMobil and PDVSA, the Venezuelan state oil company. (*Photo by Sue Sturgis*)

In the offices of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, the grassroots nonprofit group in Mid-City New Orleans, a large map of the state and the Gulf of Mexico hangs on the wall. The map is covered with thousands of red dots—some on land, some on the water, and most clustered where the Louisiana coast meets Gulf waters.

Each dot represents an oil spill that happened in 2009, the year before the BP disaster. There are 3,600 in all.

The map, created in partnership with students at the University of New Orleans, was one of the first attempts to analyze spills reported to the National Response Center, the federal agency in charge of collecting such data.

The results were striking: While the 2010 BP disaster was bigger than anything the Gulf had experienced, toxic oil spills have been a routine byproduct of the region's energy economy.

Between 2005 and 2010, there were 2,849 accidents at Louisiana's 17 oil refineries—an average of about two a week.

"There's a history of chronic chemical exposures in this state," Mariko Toyoji, a research analyst who helped compile the report, told Southern Exposure.

More than 300 of the spills occurred within a mile of a public school. Many have involved pipelines along sensitive coastal wetlands. Remarkably, some of the spills have been going on continuously since Hurricane Katrina struck more than five years ago.

The Brigade, which started out taking bucket samples of air to test for toxic contamination, found that spills aren't the only way Louisiana's oil has been finding its way into communities and ecosystems. The group also found that between 2005 and 2010, there were 2,849 accidents at the state's 17 refineries—an average of about two a week. And those are just the ones that the companies reported.

The result of these refinery mishaps: 22 million pounds of pollution were released into the environment, according to a Bucket Brigade analysis of data reported by the refineries to the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality. Those releases included toxic and cancer-causing chemicals such as benzene and volatile organic compounds.

"The BP oil spill is a great illustration of the dynamics happening every day in this state," says Anne Rolfes, the Bucket Brigade's executive director. "These accidents are happening all the time, and there's no enforcement."

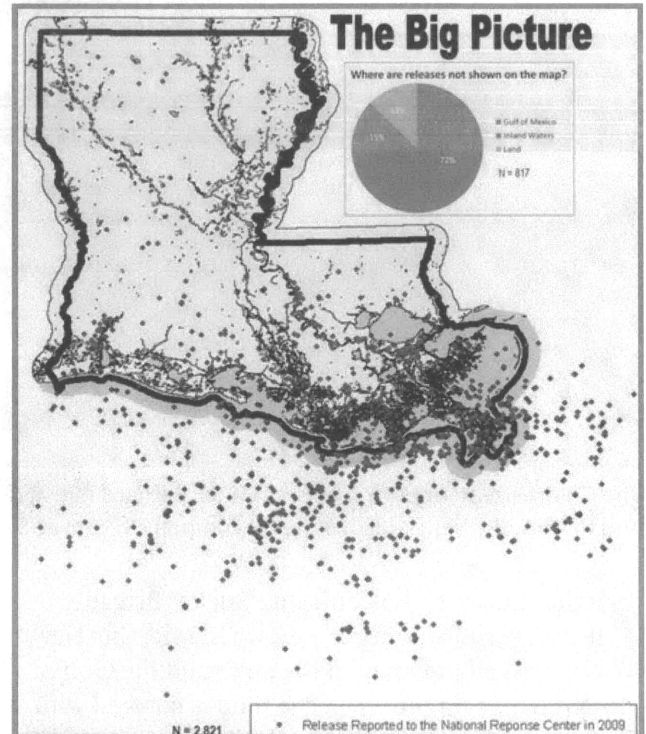
'WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW CAN HURT YOU'

Today, Louisiana is the fourth-biggest oil-producing state in the U.S. after Alaska, Texas and California. The birth of the industry in Louisiana can be traced back to 1901, when the Heywood well in Jefferson Davis Parish in southwestern Louisiana first began producing oil in commercial quantities. Eight years later a refinery opened in Baton Rouge; today, ExxonMobil's Baton Rouge refinery is one of the largest in North America.

The oil drilling, refining and related petrochemical industries bring undoubted benefits: One industry-commissioned study estimated the total direct and indirect economic impact for Louisiana at $65 billion a year. But the benefits are not distributed equitably—and neither are the drawbacks.

The dynamics are rooted deep in Southern history. As scholar Barbara L. Allen details in her book *Uneasy Alchemy: Citizens and Experts in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor Disputes*, after the Civil War the federal government distributed farmland to the newly freed slaves, often on or near the plantations where they had previously worked, and typically deeded the land to extended family groups. When the oil refineries came later, they bought the larger plantations from wealthy whites, thus avoiding the need to negotiate with multiple owners whose title to the land wasn't always clear.

"The oil industry replaced the plantation economy after Reconstruction," observes Monique Harden, an attorney with Advocates for Environmental Human Rights in New Orleans.



The dots on this map show all of the oil releases in Louisiana that were reported to the National Response Center in 2009. (*Map by Louisiana Bucket Brigade*)

African-American communities have borne the brunt of the pollution from the nearby refineries and petrochemical facilities. So has the Mississippi River, which in addition to supplying a key shipping lane has served as a convenient disposal site for the industry's toxic wastes. The 85-mile stretch of river from Baton Rouge to New Orleans eventually came to be known as "Cancer Alley" by local leaders and environmental health advocates who say there is an unusual concentration of illnesses suffered near the polluting industries.

Diamond residents had taken to sleeping fully clothed in case they had to flee in the night.

One of these towns is Norco, located in St. Charles Parish about 25 miles west of New Orleans. Today Norco is home to 3,500 people and six major oil refineries and petrochemical plants. In 2009, these facilities reported releasing more than 1.1 million pounds of toxic pollution into the air, according to the Environmental Protection Agency's Toxics Release Inventory, which compiles pollution data self-reported by industry.

Iris Carter, who was born in segregated Norco's African-American neighborhood of Diamond in the early 1950s, remembers when the Shell Chemical plant expanded to the edge of her community. She grew up smelling terrible odors, and watching the plant's good jobs going to whites that lived farther away.

A turning point came in 1973, when the mere spark from a resident starting a lawnmower above one of the plant's leaking underground pipelines was enough to trigger a blast that killed two people. Diamond's residents decided they'd had enough, and began picketing the facility and demanding that Shell relocate them.

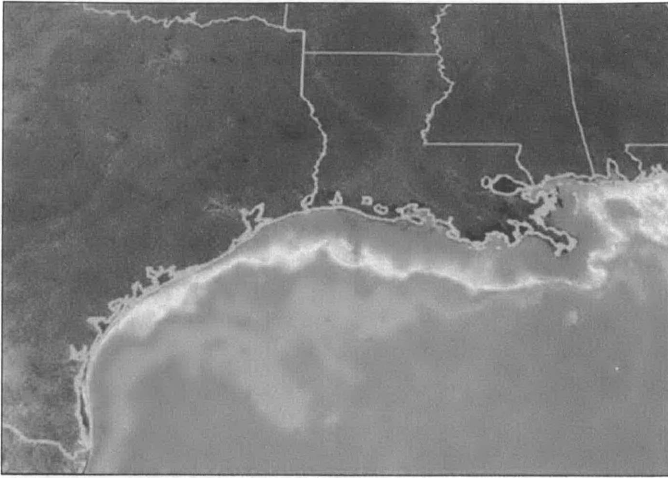
"When Miss Helen and that boy blew up [from the explosion], that was the deciding thing," Carter said in an interview with Southern Exposure.

After pressure from Carter and the Concerned Citizens of Norco, Shell finally agreed to buy out Diamond residents, who had grown so rattled by the plant's frequent accidents that they took to sleeping fully clothed in case they had to flee in the night. Of about 200 families that once called the community home, only about 20 remain today, their houses scattered among open fields.

Iris Carter points to the Shell Chemical plant that she and others suspect is responsible for sickening residents of the nearby community of Norco, La. (*Photo by Sue Sturgis*)

Families like the Carters have also suffered a public health nightmare they believe can be directly linked to years of toxic exposures. Carter has been diagnosed with environmentally related asthma, and her daughter is also asthmatic. Carter's mother died of cancer, and one of her sisters died of the autoimmune disease scleroderma—two illnesses Carter says are common in Diamond. Another sister is currently being treated for a rare blood cancer.

"We didn't know it was dangerous," Carter says. "Sometimes what you don't know can hurt you."



The Gulf Dead Zone, an area where the ocean is so depleted of oxygen that sea animals can't live there for much of the year, was among the largest in history in 2010. (*Image by NASA/NOAA*)

A 'COME-TO-JESUS' MOMENT?

Norco's experience is far from exceptional: The energy companies lining the Mississippi River routinely unleash enormous amounts of pollution, much of which eventually empties into the Gulf of Mexico.

Southern Exposure analyzed data from the EPA's Toxics Release Inventory, looking at the 18 petroleum industry facilities in EPA's database that are located in the Louisiana parishes along the Mississippi River for the five-year period from 2005 through 2009.

During that time, those 18 facilities dumped a total of more than 24 million pounds of toxic chemicals directly into the river or nearby waterways that drain into the Mississippi.

On top of that, they emitted another 237 million pounds of toxic chemicals to the air, some of which eventually end up in the river following rains that wash them from the air and land.

Much of this pollution ends up in the Gulf of Mexico, which in addition to oil spills and refinery effluents faces another environmental threat: the Gulf Dead Zone.

Scientists believe the Gulf Dead Zone is caused by a mix of high-nitrogen fertilizer from Midwestern farmland and sewage run-off, which has caused an explosion of algae that robs ocean waters of oxygen, making it unable to support other aquatic life. Last year's Gulf Dead Zone was one of the largest ever measured at over 7,700 square miles—almost the same size as New Jersey.

The BP disaster seems to have exacerbated these ongoing threats to the health of the Gulf.

Since the spill, fishermen have been reporting unusual problems with their catches: lesions on shrimp, crabs with holes in their shells, red snapper with rotting fins. Meanwhile, dead dolphins have been washing up on Gulf beaches in unprecedented numbers, leading the federal government to declare an "unusual mortality event." Scientists have also found more oxygen-depleted areas near the spilled oil, raising concerns that the BP disaster may have made the dead zone worse.

BP announced in August 2010 that it would fund a three-year state study of the oil spill's impact on Gulf fisheries. However, the company has not agreed to fund a longer-term and more comprehensive fisheries study that Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal requested.

Efforts to document the impact of oil pollution on the Gulf's people and communities routinely run into roadblocks.

While the National Institutes of Health announced in September 2010 that it was launching a multi-year study to look at the disaster's health impact on 55,000 cleanup workers, many of whom are now reporting illnesses they believe are related to the spill, there is no comparable effort to study the health of Gulf residents who weren't part of the cleanup, or the cumulative impact of pollution from the BP spill when combined with years of other toxic exposures.

More than a year after the BP calamity, spills and pollution from the Gulf's oil companies continue. In March 2011, another oil spill of mysterious origin that was eventually blamed on an Anglo-Suisse Offshore Partners well damaged by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, dumped another estimated 640,000 gallons of oil into the Gulf.

"A reckoning with the oil industry needs to happen," says Anne Rolfes of the Bucket Brigade. "We need a come-to-Jesus moment."

Blocking Reform

Since the BP disaster, oil and gas companies have largely succeeded in derailing new health and safety rules. But the Gulf energy lobby is used to wielding its political and economic muscle to ensure officials look out for its interests.

By Chris Kromm and Sue Sturgis

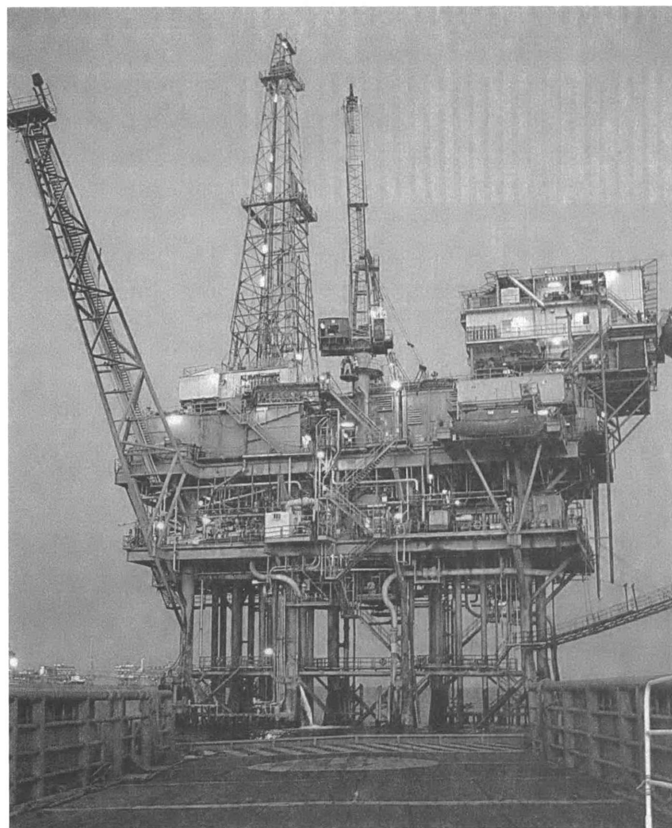
In May 2010, with oil still gushing from BP's failed Deepwater Horizon rig in the Gulf of Mexico and inundating the coast with pollution, the Obama administration took what, at the time, seemed like a tepid step: The Department of Interior announced a six-month freeze on new deepwater oil drilling.

The temporary moratorium affected only some 30 future projects; not a single oil-producing well in the Gulf was stopped. But that didn't stop Louisiana politicians and energy interests from declaring it an act of war on Gulf states—and swiftly joining forces to fight back.

Edison Chouest Offshore, the nation's largest drilling services company and led by billionaire Republican donor Gary Chouest, warned that the moratorium would immediately lead to "mass layoffs" and over $300 million in losses. Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal followed by declaring—at an "Economic Survival Rally" organized by energy companies including Edison Chouest—that the drilling pause was a "second disaster" for the Gulf Coast on par with the BP spill itself.

Dire warnings of lost jobs and economic calamity soon flowed from every corner of Louisiana. In a ruling that temporarily struck down the moratorium, a federal district judge in New Orleans—who himself held significant energy investments—claimed that the president's decision could eliminate up to "150,000 jobs" and cause "irreparable harm" to the Gulf economy. A Louisiana State University economics professor, with funding from the oil industry-backed American Energy Alliance, claimed the federal government's measure would cause $2.1 billion in losses over time.

Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-Louisiana) even went so far as to block Obama's nomination for the Office of Management and Budget to protest the moratorium's "detrimental impacts" on the Gulf region.



An offshore oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico. *(Photo by Chad Teer)*

When the Interior Department announced a six-month pause on new offshore drilling projects after the Deepwater Horizon disaster, Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.)—one of the biggest recipients of contributions from the energy industry—blocked President Obama's nomination to head the Office of Management and Budget. (*Official U.S. Senate portrait*)

But while the environmental health hazards of BP's drilling disaster unfolded, the feared economic collapse never materialized. As of August 2010, only two exploratory rigs had left Gulf waters, as the New Orleans Times-Picayune reported. By October 2010, the region had churned out 502 million barrels of oil, putting it on track to match the 569 million barrels pumped in 2009—and far exceed the 422 million from 2008.

And what about the thousands of lost jobs? The state's own economic numbers showed few displaced by the moratorium. The Louisiana Workforce Commission—despite having sent a representative to another industry-sponsored rally in July 2010 to warn of widespread job losses—issued rosy reports of record job gains throughout 2010, ending with a December press release that proudly announced Louisiana employment was at its "highest level since April 2009."

"Having job gains for six straight months is a welcome growth trend," enthused Curt Eysink, the commission's executive director in the end-of-year report. "Many other states would like to see this type of growth."

But the relentless attacks on President Obama's drilling policy resulted in a big political victory for the energy industry: By early April 2011, the administration had approved nine permits for new deepwater projects in the Gulf of Mexico—even though Congress, in the words of the Times-Picayune, had done "virtually nothing" to address the regulatory failures raised by the BP disaster.

OILING THE POLITICAL MACHINE

The moratorium jobs scare was a classic case study of the Gulf Coast energy lobby in action—a powerful network of people, companies and groups that for decades have used their economic and political clout to ensure lawmakers look out for their interests, and stave off rules and regulations addressing the health and environmental consequences of the energy industry's activities.

As the moratorium jobs debate revealed, in many cases the economic clout of the Gulf energy industry speaks for itself: Merely raising the specter of job losses and reduced investment is often enough to win public and political support.

But when flexing their economic muscle isn't enough, oil and gas companies also know how to navigate the halls of government through one of the most powerful and sophisticated political pressure networks in the country.

First in the Gulf energy industry's arsenal of political influence is spending millions of dollars in campaign contributions targeted at state and federal lawmakers. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, people and committees tied to oil and gas companies donated $238.7 million to candidates and parties between 1990 and 2010, one of the largest amounts of any industry.

More than 75 percent of those contributions have gone to Republicans.

Of the oil and gas contributions flowing to federal candidates, many are linked to companies with big investments in Gulf Coast oil drilling.

The "oil majors" like Conoco, Exxon and Shell are well-represented in the Gulf energy lobby, but many are like Edison Chouest Offshore—hardly national household names, but well-known among Louisiana politicians. In the 2009-2010 election cycle alone, members of the Louisiana congressional delegation

received more than $156,000 in campaign contributions linked to Edison Chouest, making the company among the top 10 sources of contributions for all but two of the state's eight U.S. senators and representatives.

Chouest is also a leading source of money in Louisiana state politics, where—as with federal contributions—the spending heavily favors Republicans. In 2008, the Chouest family and businesses donated more than $132,000 to Republican Gov. Bobby Jindal's election campaign and local Republicans. Once in office, Jindal's first economic development project steered $14 million in state incentives to expand a port in Terrebonne Parish that would boost Chouest's plans for a shipbuilding facility, as the Baton Rouge Advocate reported.

The Louisiana company's giving mirrors a pattern found across the Gulf Coast states. An analysis by the National Institute on Money in State Politics last year found that oil and gas interests pumped more than $21 million into state-level races between 2003 and 2008. That figure doesn't even include money from petroleum refiners and marketers, a big part of the Louisiana energy industry.

That analysis also found that, during that five-year period, 89 percent of the money flowing directly to Gulf state partisan races benefited Republicans.

AN ARMY OF LOBBYISTS

For Gulf energy interests, equally important to achieving their political objectives is an army of lobbyists to pressure lawmakers.

At the state level, oil and gas companies have maintained a steady presence to curry favor among lawmakers. Between 2006 and 2008, 627 lobbyists representing oil and gas interests walked the halls of state government in five Gulf Coast states, according to the National Institute on Money in State Politics.

In Washington, oil and gas lobbyists—while never under-represented—have dramatically turned up their lobbying pressure in the face of Congressional debate over climate change and oil drilling. Between 2007 and 2009, the amount the industry spent on lobbying federal lawmakers more than doubled, from about $80 million to nearly $180 million, according to the Center for Responsive Politics' OpenSecrets.org database.

Even the election of business-friendly Republican leadership in the U.S. House in 2010 hasn't significantly dampened the industry's investment: A Southern Exposure analysis of lobbying data finds that 15 of the biggest energy companies with leases in the Gulf of Mexico spent more than $22 million on federal lobbying in the first quarter of 2011 alone.

Oil and gas companies know how to navigate the halls of government through one of the most powerful and sophisticated political pressure networks in the country.

BP, which spent just over $7 million on federal lobbying in 2010, spent more than $2 million in the first three months of 2011, according to reports the company filed with Congress.

The effectiveness of this lobbying apparatus was revealed in the controversy over use of chemical dispersants in the Gulf oil cleanup. Two kinds of dispersant manufactured by Nalco, a Naperville, Ill.-based chemical company, were used in unprecedented levels, despite concerns about their toxicity and the availability of safer alternatives.

Nalco has a close relationship with the oil companies whose spills its product is designed to help clean up: Its board and executives include a BP board member and a top Exxon executive, and Nalco has also been involved in a joint business venture with Exxon.

At the time Nalco was trying to push adoption of its dispersant, it was also stepping up its lobbying in Congress. While the company spent just $90,000 on federal lobbying in 2009, that amount jumped to $440,000 in 2010, according to OpenSecrets.org.

Fifteen of the biggest energy companies with leases in the Gulf of Mexico spent more than $22 million on federal lobbying in the first quarter of 2011 alone.

Nalco recruited some heavy hitters to support its agenda on Capitol Hill. It hired as its in-house lobbyist Ramola Musante, a former official at the Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Energy. It also hired Ogilvy Government Relations,

a prominent bipartisan lobbying firm whose other clients include the American Petroleum Institute and oil giant Chevron.

Among the Ogilvy lobbyists who worked for Nalco in 2010 were Drew Maloney, an administrative assistant to former Republican House Majority Whip Tom DeLay (R-Texas), and Joe Lapia, a former Senate aide to now-Vice President Joe Biden (D) and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.).

One of the pieces of legislation that Nalco lobbied on was the Safe Dispersants Act, a bill requiring advanced testing of dispersants to better understand their long-term effects on human health. The measure went nowhere in either the House or Senate.

Today Nalco's efforts appear to be paying off: In April 2011, the company reported first-quarter 2011 profits of $117.4 million—up 465 percent from $25.2 million in the first quarter of 2010.

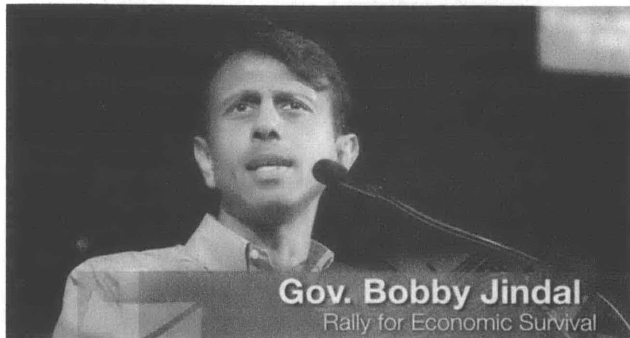
CHANNELING INDUSTRY FIREPOWER

While the sums of money Gulf energy interests spend on campaign contributions and lobbying are daunting, they offer only a glimpse of the full clout of oil and gas interests, whose influence seeps into every corner of Gulf politics.

"Our problem in Louisiana is we've had too many politicians cozy with the big oil companies. Too many duck hunting trips, too many campaign contributions, too many steaks at Chris' Steakhouse."

In 2003, for example, even the EPA under President George W. Bush—criticized by many as being too lenient on energy companies—threatened to strip Louisiana's Department of Environmental Quality of its enforcement powers because it was succumbing to industry pressure and failing to punish companies that polluted the state's air, rivers and streams.

"Our problem in Louisiana is we've had too many politicians cozy with the big oil companies, without a doubt," Foster Campbell, the public service commissioner from North Louisiana, told National Public Radio. "Too many duck hunting trips, too many campaign contributions, too many steaks at Chris' Steakhouse."



At a July 21, 2010 rally in Louisiana sponsored by energy companies, Gov. Bobby Jindal (R) warned that the federal six-month drilling moratorium would cause the Gulf region to lose up to 20,000 jobs and spark a mass exodus of drilling operations. Neither prediction turned out to be true. *(Photo still from video of the event by 3rd Coast Digital Films online at* http://bit.ly/b4iLKZ)

Over the last year, oil interests have channeled much of this political firepower towards blocking federal action in the wake of the BP oil disaster—an effort that has been largely successful.

For example, one of the major issues raised by the Gulf disaster was the amount of financial liability that companies are responsible for in the wake of a spill. The Oil Pollution Act of 1990 set a cap of $75 million that "responsible parties" need to pay for cleanup costs and damages. Critics say the low figure —which doesn't account for inflation—creates an incentive for spills.

After the BP spill resulted in billions of dollars in damages, many called for reform. As the federal government's oil spill commission wrote:

> The current $75 million cap on liability for offshore facility accidents is totally inadequate and places the economic risk on the backs of the victims and the taxpayers. The cap should be raised significantly to place the burden of catastrophic failure on those who will gain the economic rewards, and to compensate innocent victims.

But since May 2010, BP and other oil companies lobbying in Washington have successfully fended off any changes in the law. A measure to raise the cap shortly after the spill was blocked by Congressional Republicans; this spring, Republicans joined with Gulf Democrats like Sen. Mary Landrieu to weaken support for change.

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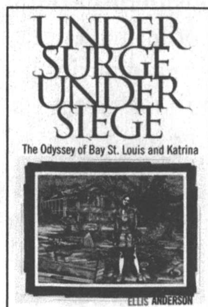

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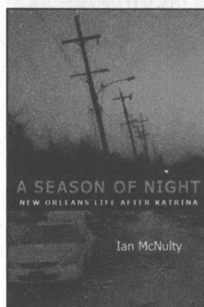

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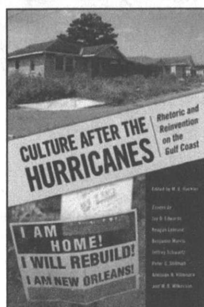

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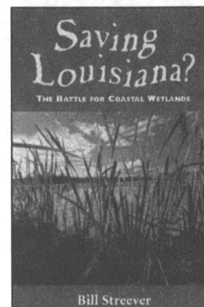

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'TIME TO ENTER THE 21ST CENTURY'

In Washington, raising the oil spill liability cap was thought to be one of the easiest post-BP reforms to pass. The proposal's failure makes advocates despair of tackling bigger challenges, like the dozens of exemptions oil and gas companies receive from environmental and safety laws.

For example, in 1976 Congress passed the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA), a landmark piece of legislation promising "cradle to grave" management of wastes, including those released during oil spills.

The law included a special Section C aimed at stringent regulation of any wastes that were deemed hazardous, using the following definition:

> [A] solid waste, or combination of solid wastes, which because of its quantity, concentration, or physical, chemical or infectious characteristic may (A) cause, or significantly contribute to an increase in mortality or in increase in serious irreversible, or incapacitating reversible, illness; or (B) pose a substantial present or potential hazard to human health or the environment when improperly treated, stored, transported, or disposed of, or otherwise managed.

However, in 1980—after pressure from energy interests—Congress exempted oil field wastes until EPA could prove they posed a danger to human health and the environment. In 1988, the EPA under Ronald Reagan ultimately concluded oil wastes posed no such risk due to "adequate" state and federal regulations—a decision one EPA staffer later allowed was made for "entirely political reasons."

In 2003, the Bush EPA re-affirmed and clarified the exemption. But health and environmental advocates say the BP disaster—and the health hazards it created for Gulf residents—offers a perfect opportunity to revisit the law.

Last September, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) petitioned EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson, asking the agency to reconsider its exemption of wastes from oil, gas and geothermal energy. It pointed out that wastes from these industries had nearly doubled since the exemption took effect—and that evidence of health hazards had grown:

> This request is based on overwhelming evidence that waste from the exploration, development and production of oil and natural gas is hazardous, taking into account its toxicity, corrosivity and ignitability, that it is released into the environment where it can cause harm, that state regulations are inadequate, and that there are numerous methods available to manage it as hazardous waste.

"The industry has expanded dramatically since 1988, meaning there is a lot more of this toxic waste that is not sufficiently regulated than there used to be," said Amy Mall of the NRDC. "It's time for the oil and gas industry to enter the 21st century and clean up its toxic mess."

When energy lobbyists caught wind of NRDC's proposal, they quickly sprang to action.

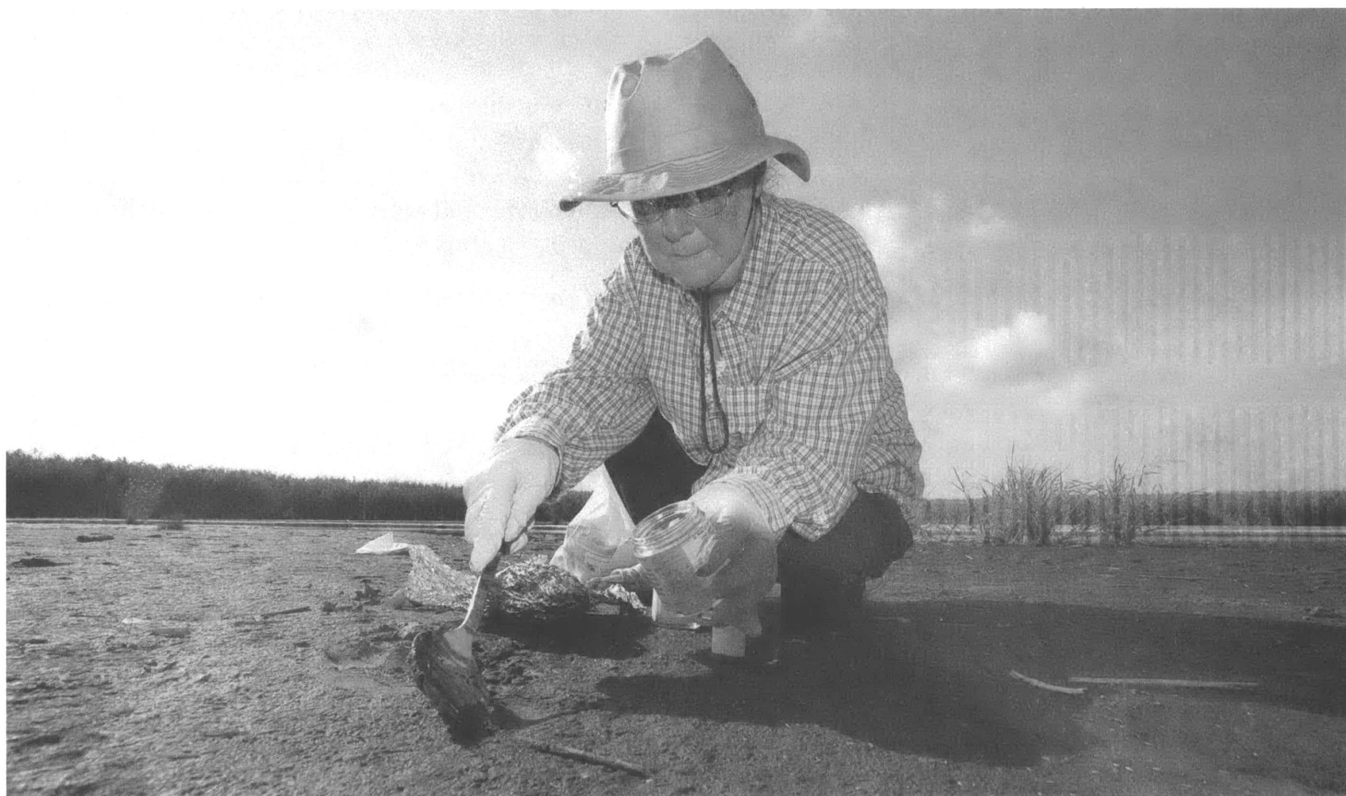
"[The petition] is consistent with NRDC's pattern of opposing the development of American oil and natural gas in every possible venue," claimed lobbyists for the Independent Petroleum Association of America in their Sept. 24, 2010 Washington Report newsletter. "IPAA is uniquely positioned to oppose the NRDC effort and will be initiating a thorough response."

They had a point: As the newsletter notes, Lee Fuller —the IPAA's vice president of government relations —was the Congressional staffer who wrote the original law that exempted oil companies from tougher hazardous waste regulation, 30 years before the BP disaster.

Sick For Justice

Facing toxic health threats and an uncertain future, Gulf residents are fighting for change.

By Sue Sturgis



Frustrated with a lack of tests by BP and government agencies, environmental chemist Wilma Subra, in partnership with the Louisiana Environmental Action Network, took it upon herself to analyze soil samples for toxic chemicals linked to oil and dispersants. (*Photo by Jeffrey Dubinsky*)

When BP's Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010, the disaster upended Cherri Foytlin's life, pushing the 38-year-old mother of six on a path of activism she had never imagined.

At the time, the Foytlins were just getting back on their feet after losing their home in Oklahoma to foreclosure. Foytlin's husband, an oil industry worker, moved the family to Louisiana to find a better job, and they ended up in Rayne, a town 150 miles west of New Orleans. Her husband was hired as a service technician for offshore rigs, and Foytlin also found work as a reporter for a small-town newspaper.

"We were doing pretty good," Foytlin says.

So good that they even managed to buy a new house. But three days after the sale, the Obama administration

called for a six-month moratorium on new deepwater projects until they could be proved safe—and Foytlin's husband was shifted from his offshore job to a lower-paying position in his company's shop. They fell behind on their mortgage and were forced to use food stamps.

"It's really a rescue mission for me. I can't see people suffer and do nothing."

But Foytlin wasn't just worried about money: She also feared that stories of people affected by the spill weren't being told. She began visiting Gulf communities where pollution was washing ashore; when she came home she suffered severe headaches and respiratory problems.

"It felt like I was breathing with only a small piece of my lungs," she says.

Her doctor diagnosed her with severe bronchitis, telling her it was one of the worst cases he had ever seen. But when she asked him to do tests to see if it was linked to chemical exposures, he refused to perform them.

That led her to the Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN), a leading grassroots group in south Louisiana that agreed to do some tests. They discovered Foytlin's blood levels of ethylbenzene, a toxic chemical found in petroleum, were three times the national average. Ethylbenzene is known to cause eye and throat irritation and damage to the inner ear; it's also classified as a possible human carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer.

That discovery—and the fear of her children ages 3 to 14 losing their mother too soon—turned Foytlin into an outspoken activist. She has talked to federal officials and numerous reporters about what she and other Gulf residents are experiencing.

"Making our communities whole again includes helping every man, woman, and child who has become and will become sick as a result of the BP oil disaster."

To make sure the media noticed, in March and April 2011 Foytlin walked all the way from New Orleans to Washington, D.C., where she joined protests at a youth-led conference called Power Shift advocating

Gulf activist Cherri Foytlin walked from Louisiana to Washington, D.C. to address a gathering of clean-energy advocates one year after the BP disaster. (*Photo by Ada McMahon/Bridge the Gulf*)

for a transition to cleaner energy sources. The activists presented BP with a bill for $9.9 billion—the amount the company had initially anticipated writing off on its tax bill for the Gulf disaster. BP has since upped that amount to almost $13 billion.

For Foytlin, activism has now become a life calling. "It's really a rescue mission for me," she says. "I can't see people suffer and do nothing."

'ACCIDENTAL ACTIVISTS'

Foytlin's story echoes that of many Gulf residents who have been spurred to action by the BP disaster. Riki Ott, a marine toxicologist and former commercial fisher from Alaska who became active herself in the wake of the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster, describes them as "accidental activists."

"These are people who were minding their own business when something happened to them that made them into activists," Ott told Southern Exposure. Ott has encountered many such newly engaged residents since BP's calamity. When the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded, Ott came to the Gulf Coast to meet with concerned citizens and share lessons from the earlier disaster in Alaska.

People would often ask her what they should do. But Ott would turn the question around: What did they think should happen?

"Figuring out what to do together is the key," says Ott, who sees the BP disaster as an opportunity to engage more Deep South residents in challenging unaccountable corporations.

Ott says many residents have asked for more independent testing to see what kind of contamination they're being exposed to from the spill. Ott and others were able to put them in contact with LEAN, which was founded 25 years ago to address industrial pollution.

LEAN quickly responded to concerns about a lack of protective gear for cleanup workers, purchasing about $12,000 worth of equipment themselves. The group also met with federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration officials after hearing stories about cleanup workers threatened with being fired for wearing protective equipment.

At the same time, Wilma Subra—an award-winning environmental chemist who works with LEAN—took environmental samples and had them tested for oil-related contamination. She also analyzed Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) air monitoring data and confirmed that Gulf Coast residents were being exposed to potentially dangerous levels of airborne contaminants. She conducted independent tests that confirmed the presence of significant levels of oil pollution in coastal soils and plants as well as in sea life.

In addition, Subra has been sampling the blood of cleanup workers and coastal residents—and finding unusually high levels of contaminants associated with petroleum pollution in people's bodies. The work she and LEAN have been doing is part of an organizing strategy to arm Gulf Coast residents with the data they need to ensure their concerns are taken seriously by regulatory authorities.

"We are gathering evidence that I don't believe you can dismiss," says Marylee Orr, LEAN's executive director.

A LIFELONG FIGHT

Carrying out their own scientific tests is just one of an array of strategies the Gulf's grassroots groups are using to channel community anger towards long-term solutions.

Activists posing as HHS and BP officials prepare to speak at a spoof press conference to draw attention to the post-oil spill health crisis. *(Photo by Louisiana Bucket Brigade)*

WALKING FOR TRUTH IN THE GULF

By Cherri Foytlin

Cherri Foytlin (at right), mother of six and wife of an oil worker in Rayne, La., walked over 1,200 miles from Louisiana to Washington, D.C. in March and April 2011 to tell her fellow Americans and government leaders about the health problems that she and other Gulf Coast residents are facing in the aftermath of the BP disaster. This is a speech she gave after arriving in Washington during an April 14 event promoting cleaner energy alternatives. *(Photo by Rocky Kistner/NRDC)*

This week, I've come to Washington, D.C. from the Gulf Coast. Thirty-four days and 1,243 miles ago, I set off on foot from New Orleans, La. I've faced tornadoes, rainstorms, heat exhaustion and countless blisters. But here I am, and I walked the whole way.

Why walk? Because it was clear that the reality of the BP disaster was not reaching our leaders in Washington, the mainstream media, or the rest of the country. So I decided to break this truth barrier in the simplest way I know how —by walking right through it and talking to average American citizens along the way.

BP has poured tens of millions of dollars into advertising to convince America that its oil disaster is cleaned up. President Obama and Congress have all but ignored the disaster since last summer. And the mainstream media have been sending the message, through its silence, that things are back to normal.

But things are far from normal on the Gulf Coast.

Today, most BP clean-up crews have been dismantled, yet new and weathered oil continues to show up on our beaches and in our marshes. Wildlife continues to wash up dead on our shores, by the hundreds.

There's certainly plenty of anger: When BP claims czar Kenneth Feinberg spoke in New Orleans on the one-year anniversary of the disaster, one man spoke for many when he yelled, "We're sick and this is what happened to us. We've been poisoned by BP."

But getting heard—especially when competing with the money, lobbyists and public relations savvy of oil companies—can require some creativity.

That was the approach used by two enterprising men at the high-powered Gulf Coast Leadership Summit held in April 2011. They called an impromptu press conference, one claiming to be a federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) staffer who announced a ban on chemical dispersants, and another who said he was a spokesperson for BP, which was offering to pay for free medical clinics for those sickened by the spill.

But the men were imposters, and the press conference was actually a piece of political theater organized by the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, the grassroots group based in New Orleans, with help from the Yes Lab, a project that helps activist groups get media attention in creative ways.

The long-term impacts of the toxic cocktail of oil and dispersant (nearly 2 millions gallons of which were sprayed in the Gulf, the largest release ever) may not be known for years. Despite the unknowns about the future, we do know that coastal residents are facing an urgent, growing health crisis on the Gulf Coast.

Today, thousands of people living on the Gulf Coast are experiencing headaches, respiratory afflictions, heart palpitations, liver and kidney damage and skin lesions—with limited or no access to appropriate health care. These symptoms go beyond those of the clean-up workers; anyone who breathes the air or eats the seafood may be affected.

The economic devastation also continues. The claims czar appointed by President Obama, Kenneth Feinberg, has so far proved inadequate in providing fair settlements. The Gulf Coast is devastated by the lack of fishing opportunities and decreased tourism, and still reeling from the moratorium on oil drilling. Feinberg was appointed to relieve this economic pain, but instead was found by a federal judge to be beholden to BP.

Coastal residents, backed into a corner by economic necessity, often accept unfair settlements, signing away their right to sue BP in the process. The option of eating today or dealing with 20 years of litigation is not a real option at all.

The long-term sustainability of the region's economy, environment, and health is very much in question. But Congress, the President, and the media have mostly turned a blind eye to the ongoing disaster.

Congress has yet to act to allocate funding to restore the Gulf Coast. Under the Clean Water Act, BP and other responsible parties will be required to pay fines for the damage they have caused to the environment. These fines, based on the number of barrels released, could reach up to $20 billion. But U.S. law does not specify that the penalty dollars have to be used in the Gulf. And the company's lawyers may try to reduce that amount to as little as $3 million.

Congress must pass legislation that directs BP's fines and penalties specifically to Gulf Coast ecosystem restoration and community recovery, and the federal government must fight to ensure BP does not limit its liability. Without Congressional action, the Gulf and its people may never fully be restored.

A year ago, in the days before the disaster began, we thought that the laws regulating the oil industry and protecting public health were stringent and adequately enforced to prevent catastrophe. We were wrong. What has happened to the people and environment in the Gulf of Mexico is a human and civil rights violation. And it continues to be an environmental and humanitarian crisis.

The lack of governmental protection on behalf of the people is disheartening and destructive to the very fiber of our country's foundation. But if anything good has come out of the disaster, it is the growing activation of Gulf Coast residents. People like me who trusted in our government and democracy, but now see the true sway that corporations and the oil industry have.

Rest assured, there is a movement growing on the Gulf Coast for clean air, clean water, health, justice, and democracy. But we can't do it alone.

Cherri Foytlin co-founded Gulf Change and blogs for www.BridgeTheGulfProject.org, where this piece originally appeared.

"This action was all about highlighting the fact that people are truly sick and the government and BP are just standing by," says Bucket Brigade Executive Director Anne Rolfes.

Getting heard—especially when competing with the money, lobbyists and public relations savvy of oil companies—can require some creativity.

After months of official silence, the agitation and persistence of Gulf activists may finally be forcing officials to address their health concerns. At the April 2011 panel discussion with Feinberg in New Orleans, U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) pledged to follow up with BP on medical claims. She also said she is planning to hold a meeting specifically to address health problems related to the spill.

And on May 24, a coalition of 154 organizations that advocate for public health, the environment and fishing communities sent a letter to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson and HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius asking for immediate action on the Gulf health crisis. Among their demands was the creation of a Gulf Coast Health Restoration Task Force that includes members of affected communities.

"Making our communities whole again includes helping every man, woman, and child who has become and will become sick as a result of the BP oil disaster," the letter stated. "Restoring our environment also means restoring our community's health."

In the meantime, Foytlin—and many other concerned Gulf Coast citizens like her—have no intention of letting up. Though she once thought her walk to Washington would be her last act as an activist, Foytlin now says she realizes that it was really only the beginning of what promises to be a much longer struggle for a healthier and safer future in the Gulf.

"We're going to keep fighting," says Foytlin. "This is going to be a lifelong project for me."

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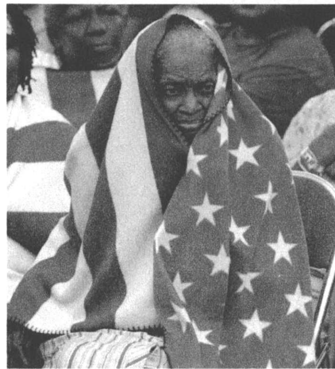
But we can't stop now: Powerful interests are seeking to turn back the clock on voting rights, labor laws, health and safety rules and decades of progress in the South.



Institute investigations in the Gulf Coast have been covered by ABC News, CNN, USA Today and other major media—and have been used by thousands of local leaders working for a just recovery.

THE INSTITUTE INVESTIGATIVE FUND

We've launched a 40th Anniversary Campaign for the Institute Investigative Fund. Our goal: To raise $100,000 by December 2011 to support the Institute's fearless investigative journalism and powerful voice for change in the South.

We're already half way to our goal—and with your support today, you can help make our campaign a success!

Your tax-deductible gift will sponsor award-winning investigative reports, as well as innovative programs like the Freedom Journalism School, the Institute's new program to train a new generation of public interest reporters across the South.

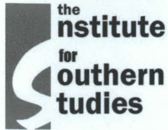
TWO EASY WAYS TO GIVE

Here's how you can help us reach our goal:

1. **VISIT US ONLINE** at www.southernstudies.org and make a secure online donation to the Institute Investigative Fund

2. **MAIL YOUR CONTRIBUTION** of $25, $50 or more to Institute for Southern Studies, P.O. Box 531, Durham, NC 27702 – Attn: 40th Campaign

Thank you—and thanks for supporting independent journalism and a voice for change!



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Founded in 1970 by civil rights veterans, the Institute is a nonprofit media, research and education center dedicated to a more democratic, just and sustainable future in the South. The Institute publishes Facing South, the popular online magazine, and Southern Exposure, a bi-annual print journal and winner of the National Magazine Award, two George Polk Awards and other honors. For more information visit www.southernstudies.org

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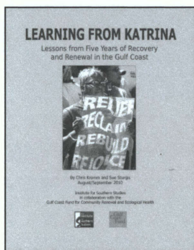

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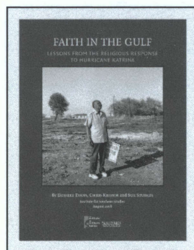

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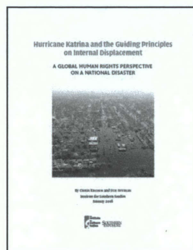

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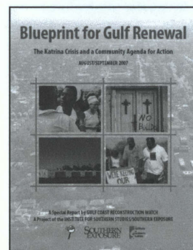

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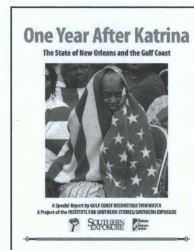

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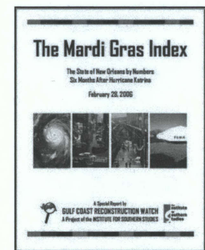

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