Swartz: Oil on the coasts? 'We will never, ever get it off.'

By SALLY SWARTZ
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Floridians on both coasts and in the Keys will be dealing with problems from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill for a long time, a geologist who worked for the oil industry told Martin County Conservation Alliance.

Jim Egan, executive director of the Palm Bay-based Marine Resources Council, which is working to restore the Indian River Lagoon, said that what people don't see may be worse than the "tar balls and brown, chocolatey foam" he predicts Treasure Coast residents likely will see on beaches.

"We could see an annoying problem that goes on for years," Mr. Egan said. "You clean up what you've got, then it happens again. We could see nothing this year, then a hurricane stirs it up and it becomes a horrendous problem next year."

Twenty-one years after the Exxon Valdez spill, Alaska's Prince William Sound looks great, Mr. Egan said. "But scratch the surface of the sand, and you hit tar. Oil got into the food chain. The region's cod fishery collapsed three years later and never came back."

Oil companies, he said, "are back in the 1920s and '30s" and seldom do anything for either safety or environmental protection unless forced. Since 2001, he said, the industry has had 858 fires and explosions, 1,349 injuries and 69 deaths in the Gulf of Mexico.

"The strategy with this spill is, 'Out of sight, out of mind,' " Mr. Egan said. Although some oil remains on the surface, chemical dispersants have pushed more oil close to the bottom. He calls the dispersants, which haven't been used on such a large scale, "an experiment." There's no way to track the underwater plume or predict its path.

That could mean trouble not only for shallow Keys reefs but for deepwater reefs in the gulf and, along the East Coast, the Oculina Bank, reefs in 250-300 feet of water under the Gulf Stream, about 25 miles offshore from St. Lucie County to Daytona Beach. Mr. Egan believes deepwater reefs could be "sitting ducks." If oil fouls the reefs, he said, "we will never, ever get it off … it takes hundreds of years to break down."

Dennis Hanisak, director of the Center for Marine Ecosystem Health at Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute in Fort Pierce, hopes that oil remains on the surface and that currents don't carry underwater plumes to the Treasure Coast. Oil and the chemical dispersants enter the food chain by getting into baitfish, and then become concentrated in predator fish, Mr. Egan said, so fishery closures will be hard to predict. "The dispersant causes the oil to be sticky to water, so water-based organisms can take it in."

The toll on wildlife by early last week included 154 sea turtles, most of them the endangered Kemp's Ridley, a dozen dolphins and 23 migratory birds. Audubon of Florida urges residents not to try to help wildlife but to report oiled wildlife by calling (866) 557-1401.
Everyone in the Treasure Coast is worried about oil on top of another man-made environmental trauma. Water managers plan massive dumps of polluted fresh water from Lake Okeechobee to lower the lake before hurricane season. Too bad the agencies can't engineer the dumping to push away oil.

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