

Government Response to the BP Oil Spill

Odors from the BP Spill

June 2010

View up-to-date information on air quality along the Gulf Coast at <http://www.epa.gov/bpspill>

Residents of the Gulf Coast are concerned about odors from the BP oil spill and whether they are harmful to breathe. Some residents along the coast report smelling odors, and experiencing eye, nose, or throat irritation, nausea, or headaches.

EPA and CDC are concerned about the odors and any health effects from the pollutants causing the odors. We have been particularly concerned about pollutants that could reach shore from the burning of oil and pollutants that may evaporate from the spill as it spreads closer to shore, potentially affecting residents along the shoreline.

Since late April, EPA has been monitoring the air at multiple sites along the Gulf Coast for certain pollutants that are associated with petroleum products and from the burning oil out at sea. EPA's air monitoring to date, has found that air quality levels for ozone and particulates are normal on the Gulf coastline for this time of year and odor-causing pollutants associated with petroleum products are being found at low levels. This report summarizes the information that is available at this time. We are continuing to work to increase our information base.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has reviewed the results of EPA's sampling efforts and used information on the likely short term and long term health effects associated with these chemicals to determine whether pollutants in the air would be expected to cause health problems. The levels of some of the pollutants that have been reported to date may cause temporary eye, nose, or throat irritation, nausea, or headaches, but are not thought to be high enough to cause long-term harm. These effects should go away when levels go down or when a person leaves the area. The low levels that have been found are not expected to cause long term harm. We will continue to monitor the air and if we begin to detect levels that are higher we will provide updates to the public. For up-to-date

information on air quality and monitoring data along the Gulf Coast, please see www.epa.gov/bpspill/air.html.

Some of the odors and chemicals that are being identified in the area are as follows:

"Rotten Egg" Odor

- If you smell a "rotten egg" odor, you may be smelling hydrogen sulfide (H₂S).
- The levels of H₂S that have been reported to date may cause irritation, but as stated above, these effects should go away when H₂S levels go down, or when a person leaves the area.
- While H₂S is associated with oil and natural gas extraction, it also comes from marshes and sewage treatment plants. Because H₂S has only been seen at individual monitors on an infrequent basis, this indicates the H₂S is more likely from a local source near the monitor rather than from the oil spill. We do not know the exact source of H₂S in these areas.

"Gas Station-Like" Odor

- If you smell a 'gas station' like odor – the odor you might smell while filling up your car – it may be volatile organic compounds, or VOCs.
- The key toxic VOCs in most oils are benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene, and xylene.

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- Exposure to low levels of VOCs may cause temporary irritation of the eyes, nose, throat, and skin. It is possible that people with asthma may be more sensitive to the effect of inhaled VOCs. The VOC smell may give you a headache or upset stomach but is not expected to cause long term health effects. If you are sensitive to VOCs, you should stay indoors to limit your exposure, close windows and doors, and set your air conditioner to a recirculation mode. The smell may become stronger if the wind or weather changes.
- Historical data on oil spills indicate that VOCs are likely to evaporate, disperse and/or react quickly after the oil reaches the surface of the water.
- Currently, we are measuring very low levels of VOCs. We will continue to monitor the air and if we begin to detect VOC levels that may be harmful we will provide updates to the public. For up-to-date information on air quality and monitoring data along the Gulf Coast, please see www.epa.gov/bpspill/air.html.

“Oily” or “Tar-Like” smell

- Information we have obtained to date indicates that there are chemicals remaining in the weathered oil known as semi-volatile organic compounds (or SVOCs), and they are primarily responsible for the “oily odors.”
- EPA is monitoring for VOCs onshore to quantify the amounts of SVOCs in the air to determine if any might be present at unsafe levels. These data are posted at www.epa.gov/bpspill/air.html.
- As we get information about specific SVOCs, we will provide additional information about potential health concerns related to these compounds.

For more information

Response effort: www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com

Federal-wide response: www.whitehouse.gov/deepwater-bp-oil-spill

EPA response & validated environmental air and water sampling results: www.epa.gov/bpspill

CDC response: emergency.cdc.gov/gulfoilspill2010

National Park Service: (updates about potential park closures, resources at risk, and NPS actions to protect vital park space and wildlife) www.nps.gov/aboutus/oil-spill-response.htm

Fish and Wildlife Service: (updates along the Gulf Coast and the status of national wildlife refuges) www.fws.gov/home/dhoilspill

NOAA Fisheries Service: (daily updates on fishing closures) sero.nmfs.noaa.gov

Call Centers

Joint Information Center: (713) 323-1670 or (713) 323-1671

Medical Support Line: (for oil spill health related questions) (888) 623-0287

Report oiled shoreline or request volunteer information: (866) 448-5816

Submit alternative response technology, services or products: (281) 366-5511

Submit your vessel for the Vessel of Opportunity Program: (281) 366-5511

Submit a claim for damages: (800) 440-0858

Report oiled wildlife: (866) 557-1401