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Guest Column

## EPA kept close watch on use of dispersants

By Lisa P. Jackson, special to the Times

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Since the first days of the BP crisis that spilled hundreds of millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's priority was clear. Alongside agencies from across the federal government, we set out to defend the gulf's coastline — its people and businesses, its fragile wetlands and fisheries, and its economy just regaining strength five years after Hurricane Katrina — from the massive amount of oil.

My roots in the region run deep, so my mission was also a personal one. I grew up in New Orleans, and my mother lived there until Hurricane Katrina took her home. So as I began my many trips to the gulf in those first weeks, it was to help protect a region I call home.

As efforts ramped up to stop the flow of oil, EPA immediately began monitoring the region's air, land and water. We deployed fixed air monitors, mobile trucks and aircraft to keep watch over air quality. Our daily water and sediment sampling helped local officials make decisions about beaches. We posted our data online in a format residents could understand and that scientists could independently confirm. While some air data unrelated to the BP spill will require follow-up, the good news is that no concerns directly related to the spill have been detected anywhere near the coastline. And our monitoring continues.

We also set out to ensure BP was using dispersant responsibly and with constant monitoring. Dispersants are chemicals used to break up oil into small droplets so that the oil more quickly biodegrades in nature. While its use has understandably generated discussion and debate, based on all the information we have to date, it has proved to be an effective tool in preventing the oil from devastating the gulf's delicate coastline. EPA science tells us dispersant was effective in breaking up the oil. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration tells us dispersant does not accumulate in the food chain. Science from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration confirms that dispersant has stayed more than 40 miles away from the shore and wetlands. In fact, of more than 2,000 samples collected by NOAA, only two detected the potential presence of dispersant at all.

This is not to say EPA or any of our federal partners who oversaw BP's use of dispersant took the decision lightly. In fact, it was the most difficult decision I have made as EPA administrator. That is why we allowed BP to use dispersant only on our terms.

When BP approached EPA and the Coast Guard about using dispersant 1 mile below the water's surface — something never tried before — we required BP to conduct multiple tests to first ensure its effectiveness. We insisted BP agree to a stringent, daily monitoring plan that tracked dissolved oxygen levels — a key indicator of both the health of the water and sea life. And we made sure we could stop BP's use at any time.

Soon after that, the then-federal on-scene coordinator, Rear Adm. Mary Landry, joined me in issuing a directive requiring BP to use dispersant on the surface only when burning, skimming and other collection methods weren't possible, and we capped the amount BP could use below sea. The result of our actions was a more than 70 percent reduction of BP's use of dispersant from its peak. At the same time, I directed EPA's head of research and development to gather our own science on dispersants. Our independent, peer-reviewed results, which looked at what is called acute fish toxicity, determined that no dispersant product is any more or less toxic than the others and that dispersant mixed with oil is no more toxic than oil alone.

It is important to note that the dispersant used in the gulf was on the NCP Product Schedule which allowed it to be selected for use, though no one ever anticipated using the quantities that were used in this response. But put in perspective, the amount of dispersant used in this crisis is less than 1 percent of the amount of oil BP spilled into the gulf.

Nevertheless, we know that legitimate questions about the long-term implications remain, so our monitoring continues.

Over time, the headlines may fade. But the history of the BP oil spill is still to be written. That is why EPA will remain with the residents of the gulf region who need our help and protection. We'll continue monitoring the air, water and land. We'll continue working with federal, state and local partners to scrutinize BP's cleanup effort. And we'll continue to expand the science that will help guide us through our inevitable future challenges.

*Lisa P. Jackson is administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency.*

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