Questioning the effectiveness of oil dispersants in Gulf oil spill

EurekAlert

The widespread belief that chemical dispersants will enhance the breakdown of oil from the Gulf of Mexico disaster is based on weak scientific data. That's among the topics in a comprehensive status report that is the cover story in *Chemical & Engineering News* (C&EN), ACS' weekly newsmagazine.

C&EN Senior Correspondent Jeff Johnson and Assistant Editor Michael Torrice note in the article that government and industry officials continue to struggle with how to handle the massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, in which more than 20 million gallons of oil leaked into the ocean. Detergent-like chemicals called dispersants, which break up oil slicks into drops, are among the key remediation tools. C&EN points out that technicians who apply the dispersants assume that the chemicals will help breakdown the oil by creating smaller droplets that oil-eating microbes in the ocean can consume. But a 2005 National Research Council report, which described the results of three decades of research into dispersants' effects, gives mixed reviews. Studies showed evidence for "enhancement, inhibition, and no effect."

The report raises concerns that the microbes may chew up the dispersant molecules instead of dining on the oil. Nevertheless, as government and industry officials continue to wrestle with the best way to cope with the disaster, chemical dispersants will continue to play a role in this cleanup, the article concludes.

SOURCE [1]

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