

Who knows best about oil spills?

by Kate Mackenzie

Financial Times

June 8, 2010

At least some of the oil flowing from the BP well on the Gulf of Mexico seabed is now being captured. But many believe that better, faster solutions could have been found further outside of BP.

BP insists it has the 'best and brightest' working on the problem - and in fact, only 60 per cent of the 600 engineers tackling the leak work for BP; the remainder are from other oil companies, contractors, and government, plus a few academics. The company's assurances were little comfort, however, for many onlookers worried that the company was not soliciting enough outside expertise. Some were angry that BP itself was trusted to solve the problem; others couldn't see how modern technology could keep failing to fix it quickly.

There has been a deluge of criticisms of BP's approach and suggestions for how it should be better tackled over the internet since the leak was first reported.

One enduring idea was 'nuking the well' which continued to circulate until it was pointed out that an explosion in a soft seabed floor might have a lot of effects, but stopping the oil flow probably wouldn't be one of them. Russian gas blowouts that were nuked weren't quite the same situation.

Of course it's quite possible that there are some good solutions that are being ignored, or delayed, despite the mechanisms for the public to suggest them. BP says that as of the end of May, it had received 31,600 suggestions to its helpline and 8,000 written submissions via the form on the Joint Information Command website. The JIC website says a triage team of 30 technicians are 'triaging' suggestions, and a BP spokesman told us on Monday that 250 of those suggestions were now at 'stage 3', with stage 4 being field testing.

The EPA is also soliciting suggestions for cleaning up and mitigating the environmental impact of the spill.

It's easy to see how people with genuine and potentially useful ideas might get upset. Waiting for your idea to get filtered out of 8,000 other random suggestions while the oil continues to flow is probably somewhat disheartening; and anyone who read this impassioned (and expletive-filled) anonymous criticism of Gulf booming practices would find it difficult not to wonder whether the people in charge know what they're doing.

We have also seen some very intelligent discussion at The Oil Drum of the detail of the various solutions BP is attempting. But the signal-to-noise ratio has been a concern there, too: there have been many pleas from the site's editors to new readers/commenters along

the lines of: don't-post-solutions-unless-you've-already-read-all-our-previous-coverage-and-do-not-mention-nukes-no-matter-what.

And then there's the inevitable reports of solutions proposed by individual engineers, geniuses, and others.

Much less impressive are the attempts to crowdsource a solution from the broader public, as though the power of user-generated content and online collaboration can solve what a bunch of highly trained scientists and engineers cannot.

Take a look at whatshouldbpdo.com, which uses a Digg-style voting system. Who knows; perhaps some of the solutions there would stop the well much quicker than BP's approaches. But among the more popular, a few are similar to what BP is actually doing, others are complaints about BP, and still others seem (at least from our layperson's perspective) to disregard the massive pressure at 5,000 feet. If free-for-all web collaboration can only come up with a Yahoo! Answers-type forum, we'd much rather put our hopes on a lone 'armchair engineer' coming up with a solution.

And it's not just BP; the Obama administration has been — somewhat bafflingly — the target of criticism for not doing enough, not doing the right thing, or not listening. As many internet commenters and pundits wondered, did people expect the president to don a scuba suit and fix it himself?

Worse, however, is the risk that the hysteria to 'do something' and 'do MORE' has already led to some poor decisions being made.

Rob Young, a professor of coastal ecology at Western Carolina University, wrote on Yale's Environment 360 blog that "in their rush to react to growing public pressure and do *something*, federal and state officials are waiving scientific review of emergency measures and embracing dubious solutions".

Nowhere is this more evident, he adds, than in the plans to build sand berms - long narrow, manmade sand islands - off the coast of Louisiana in an attempt to prevent leaked oil reaching parts of the shore:

The White House has announced that this project is now moving forward, despite serious concerns among coastal scientists, including myself, that it will not be effective in keeping oil from the coast, could do more environmental harm than good, and would be extremely expensive.

BP has put aside \$360m to pay for this project after the US Coast Guard approved it last week.

This has been one of the big demands from Louisiana; one that has attracted a lot of coverage.

In an example of how emotional the issue has become, CNN lists a few selected quotes from the ‘usually low-key’ Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal:

“I don’t want to see a drop of oil on Louisiana’s coast!”

“We’re frustrated!”

“Cut us a check!”

“This is their oil! Their damage! They caused this!”

Faced with these sorts of exhortations, and similar sentiments echoed by many others — some of whom are suffering directly from the devastation wreaked by the oil leak — is it any surprise the scientists and experts are finding it hard to be heard?