

Stop the Insanity

Scientists make a plea to Thad Allen to stop potentially harmful projects designed to clean up the BP spill.

by Sharon Begley
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It took only 24 hours to get 21 of the nation's most prominent coastal scientists to sign on to an impassioned letter to Ret. Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen, national incident commander of the Deepwater Horizon disaster. "It is time to put a halt to the numerous coastal engineering projects that are both underway and planned as a response to the Deepwater Horizon spill," argues the letter, organized by Robert Young, a specialist in wetlands and coastal environments at Western Carolina University. "These projects will do little, if any, good. At the same time, they have a great potential to change the nature of the Gulf Coast in ways that have not been investigated and are likely to be more harmful than helpful."

The schemes—both underway and proposed—now go far beyond the \$360 million project to build sand berms, which Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal persuaded the Army Corps of Engineers to OK as a way to trap oil before it fouls islands and coasts, but which threaten to alter currents in a way that could endanger coastal wetlands. Now the governor's office has applied to the Corps for permission to build another 101 miles of berms—and wants to armor them. (By "armor," they don't mean encase them in iron, but stud them with boulders and plant grass on them to make them more durable.)

"If you just build sand berms, the worst that will happen is that they won't work and will wash away," says Young. "But if you build 40 to 100 miles of 'armored' barrier islands out there, it will completely change the tidal currents and how the waves and sand move in a way that could do quite a bit of harm in ways we can't even predict. But it's indicative of the kind of unscientific thinking and planning going on in political circles in Louisiana."

The letter puts it this way: "The consensus of the scientific community is that this project will not trap oil beyond what could be accomplished using traditional methods. The berm currently being constructed off the Chandeleur Islands is like a mosquito on the back of an elephant. The sand berms will not last ... and [are] too far offshore to provide significant obstruction to oil flowing in and out of the estuary."

Armoring the berms might make them more resistant to storms, but would not make them more effective at protecting coasts from oil, argue the scientists. "They won't block

significant amounts of oil,” says Young, or protect areas behind them from storms, since they are too low and far offshore. And they are proving as fragile as Young and others predicted in June: surf kicked up by Hurricane Alex earlier this month destroyed some of the berms built along the Chandeleur Islands. And with Tropical Storm Bonnie bearing down, the berms could take a direct hit.

In addition to the berms, BP is paying for construction of a 1.5-mile “rock closure” of what’s called Katrina Cut on Dauphin Island (because the hurricane tore a gash through the island). This structure isn’t even intended to block oil, but to protect the island from storm damage. But the rock pile is “so poorly designed,” says Young, “that it is actually making the island more vulnerable to the next storm because it is taking sand from the backside of the island [the north side] to build a ridge in front of homes on the front [south] side. But it won’t last. It will just wash away in a storm, even as it turns Dauphin Island into a large sand pile.” (Young and his team have posted photos they took during flyovers of the Dauphin Island project [here](#).)

BP’s apparent success in capping the well provides breathing room to figure out the right way to protect wetlands and other coastal regions from the oil still out there, argues Young, rather than plunging headlong into mega-engineering projects whose effects are unknown. Sensitive to criticism that scientists just want to study things endlessly, delaying any action against the encroaching oil, he points out that no long-term study is actually needed. “We don’t want to do another study,” he says. “We just want politicians to use the existing knowledge base, which shows that these projects are a bad idea.”

The letter from the scientists argues that “there is still time to halt the berm project and refocus our energy on fighting the spill with traditional methods.” Despite gobs of oil turning up on beaches as far away as Alabama and Florida, those methods (primarily boom and skimming) have actually been pretty successful. As a result, says Young, “we’re increasingly optimistic that the coastal system can recover. The fact is, the oil has not penetrated deep into wetlands, shorelines, and beaches, though what’s exactly happening to the deep ocean remains a mystery.”