



Eyewitness Account: Oil Sludge 18 miles from Biloxi, MS wetlands

Update and Statement, Jeremy Symons, National Wildlife Federation, Senior Vice President, Wednesday May 5. Contact: 202-306-7902.

Photos I took yesterday are available at www.flickr.com/nwf_symons . They can be used with attribution to "National Wildlife Federation" or www.nwf.org/oilspill

"Yesterday, I covered more than a hundred miles of Gulf waters to assess the oil spill and its proximity to the Mississippi Coast and the Chandeleur Islands, part of Breton National Wildlife Refuge. The Breton Refuge, created by Teddy Roosevelt, is the second oldest refuge in the country and vital habitat for threatened species including the Brown Pelican, Least Tern, and Piping Plover.

"We left from Pass Christian, Mississippi in the afternoon and returned after dark. I had thought I understood the dangers that fish and wildlife faced, but I wasn't prepared for what we found. The first thing that hit us 18 miles from the Biloxi wetlands was the nauseating smell, like spilled gasoline at a gas station, but stronger. Then we ran into a seemingly endless sea of brown heavy sludge floating on the water. With open ocean behind us, the oil sludge spread in front of us as far as we could see, merely the farthest reaching tentacles of the spill that extended from there deep into the Gulf. The smell was most nauseating close to the water, but what overwhelmed me even more was the feel of the tar-like oil sludge in my hand. I scooped up a small glob, but it quickly coated both my hands in a greasy, heavy brown coating that clung to my hands and was impossible to dislodge until I vigorously scrubbed it with a towel. Water had no effect. There are no towels in nature.

"On the way to this spot, we saw several dozen dolphins, many of which swam with the boat and jumped playfully in our wake. If this oil sludge closes with the shore, these dolphins and other fish and wildlife trying to escape its reach could get trapped.

"We also headed out to the Chandeleur Islands off the Mississippi Coast. On the way, we saw miles-long rivers of a different type of muddy oil that, rather than run in thick clumps atop the water, was mixed into the water itself and sank to depth as far as the eye could see. This was the effect of chemical dispersants. While removing the tar-like oil from the surface, it has now turned the ocean itself brown to great depths. It has turned the waters that sustain life into a toxic mix with unknown effects throughout the food chain. We picked up one of these rivers of oil and followed it seven miles to the very shores of the Chandeleur Islands. It thinned out just hundreds of yards before shores, sparing these important birding grounds from the worst effects for the moment. There was no boom to protect these islands from the direction we approached, but it is clear that booms cannot protect any place from this mix of oil, dispersant chemicals and water. It turns the water itself toxic at all depths. We filled a plastic bottle and the toxic mix looks like untreated sewage. What few realize is that the depth of the Gulf shelf we covered varied only between 5 and 15 feet in depth. The idea that dispersed oil is sinking to great depths

where life is scarce is yet another lie from BP. People are expecting to see birds covered in heavy crude, but the real suffering in effects is happening out at sea out of sight of the cameras.”

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