

The Washington Post

How BP can clean up its mess

By Jerome E. Dobson
Friday, May 7, 2010;

To: Tony Hayward, chief executive of BP

Dear Mr. Hayward,

The environmental catastrophe unfolding on the U.S. coast of the Gulf of Mexico is bad for your company, bad for Americans and worse yet for our natural treasures. Here are suggestions as to how you can minimize the damage and regain some respect among the American public.

Engage the public. Trust private enterprise. Trust the judgment and ingenuity of the American people.

You cannot afford enough ships and crews to cleanse the entire sea.

You cannot win the hearts and minds of coastal residents by hiring them as laborers. American fishermen are fiercely independent. They resent working for anyone, especially the company that caused the problem. Every offer you make will be viewed as bribery or charity, both of which are bitter as gall to them.

They do, however, respect a trade. So, offer to buy back your oil at a price that will entice them to skim and deliver it to you. There's probably no other stretch on Earth that has as much available

capacity as the Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi coasts, including barges, tankers, fishing boats, recreational boats -- and an incredibly resourceful workforce. Fishermen and watermen (including women) are accustomed to handling about as much fuel as fish, and they can do wonders with anything that floats. You will be astounded by the clever solutions they will invent for harvesting, separating and transporting oil. Skimmers based, for instance, on standard sheets of marine plywood would have to move only about 200 feet to skim one barrel of oil where the oil is one millimeter thick. So, skimming runs wouldn't be impossibly long even when the oil is fairly thin or scattered.

Position numerous oil barges and/or small tankers around and within the oil slick. Equip each with hoists to load and

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exchange metal barrels, hoses and pumps to draw from larger containers such as fishing-boat holds. Exchange your empty barrels for their full ones.

Announce a price above market rate, say \$100 or more per barrel, discounted for seawater content -- which can be determined by specific gravity (e.g., weighing while hoisting) or other familiar means -- and adjust the price based on the number of takers and rate of collection.

Anticipate hundreds or thousands of small boats. Ask the U.S. Coast Guard to direct traffic and enforce safety measures and hazardous materials regulations, but do what you can to help (for example, receiving recreational boats with metal containers on one side and larger boats on the opposite side of each tanker, or perhaps using different tankers for each type).

Anticipate health risks. Ask the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to advise on where harvesters can find thick oil with tolerable fumes.

Position numerous lighters to continually resupply small boats, providing fuel and necessities and on-site maintenance, especially for oil-gummed equipment.

Use your present fleet with booms to corral and concentrate the oil for

skimming.

Continue to employ your own technological solutions, such as dispersants, wherever oil films are too thin to yield profitable harvests.

If recreational craft need additional insurance, make sure it is available on the spot. Insurance shouldn't be a problem for commercial craft, but check that out, too.

Commit from the outset to provide a means of cleaning and otherwise reconditioning boats -- especially their holds -- so they can return to their regular business when the crisis is over. Help fishermen protect their holds with liners or other preventive measures.

If you do this, here are the benefits:

You will stanch the oil flow and limit

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damage to marine resources, especially coastal marshes.

You will gain time to better plug the leak below.

You will recoup much of the cost when you separate and refine the recovered oil.

The public relations benefit will be enormous. You will regain favor with the groups most offended by the spill and offset job losses in the very industries most harmed by the spill.

Name it "Operation Dunkirk" after the heroic World War II evacuation in which small boats ferried 330,000 troops back home to England, rescuing them from certain imprisonment at Hitler's hands. That's the same spirit you'll find among the boaters who come to rescue their own beloved beaches, marshes and fishing grounds -- and save BP itself in so doing.

The writer, a Jefferson science fellow in the State Department's Office of the Geographer, is president of the American Geographical Society and a professor of geography at the University of Kansas at Lawrence. From 1982 to 1994, his work at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory was funded by the National Marine Fisheries Service as part of its Coastal Change Analysis Program.

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