

Locals Criticize Delay in Getting Oil Skimmers to Gulf

by DAVID SCHAPER
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A new oil-skimming device that promises to scoop up more of the heavy crude from the Gulf, and do it more efficiently than traditional skimmers, is doing little to quiet critics who say BP and the federal government are still not getting enough skimmers to respond to the spill.

The heavy oil recovery device, or HORD, involves a large metal chassis, 6 feet long, 3 feet high and 3 feet wide. A big sturdy mesh bag fits inside the cage.

"This bag drags through the heavy oil held open by that chassis," says Raymond Butler, a special projects manager for BP. The skimmer is kind of like a big version of a lawnmower bag collecting grass clippings.

"The water still passes through this mesh, but it captures sheen and heavy oil," Butler says. When the mesh is full, it is cinched closed and lifted out of the water to be disposed of.

Capt. Gerry Matherne invented the HORD. The 61-year-old supertanker captain and BP contractor has spent a lifetime on the water and holds degrees in engineering and oceanography.

In Mobile Bay, two boats about 30 to 40 yards apart drag a containment boom behind them in a V-formation, corralling a slick of oil on the surface.

The heavy oil recovery device is at the bottom of the V. As the boats slowly move forward, Matherne says, water passes through the mesh bag, coming out clean while the oil is collected.

"This is a very dense oil, the consistencies of peanut butter or toothpaste," he says, "and therefore it's very difficult to use traditional skimming techniques."

The Jones Act

But despite this big improvement in skimming, local parish leaders, state officials and others on the coast say there simply haven't been enough skimmers in the Gulf.

They say BP was slow to respond from the outset and delayed requests for special tools, like the giant "A Whale" skimmer from Taiwan.

Many Republicans accuse President Obama of refusing to allow foreign skimmers to help out by not granting waivers of a maritime law called the Jones Act.

Texas Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchinson and former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, among others, point out that President Bush waived provisions of the Jones Act to allow ships sailing under foreign flags to help out after Hurricane Katrina, and they say this administration should do the same.

But **Dennis Bryant**, a maritime consultant and former Coast Guard captain who supervised the implementation of the Oil Pollution Act in 1990, says the Jones Act simple doesn't apply in this situation.

"That is absolutely, totally bogus," he says.

Bryant says the Jones Act prevents foreign-flagged ships only from transporting commerce — goods and products — from one U.S. port to another and is not keeping them from helping in oil skimming.

"We've got 15 foreign-flag vessels that I'm aware of right now operating on this incident," he says.

Bryant adds that while the skimming response may have been a little disorganized at first, it has gotten better. This is an unexpected oil spill of unprecedented magnitude, he says.

Audio link:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/player/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=128427660&m=128427816>