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# Oil spill not expected to reach East Coast

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AP / Alex Brandon

### NARRAGANSETT

An internationally known Rhode Island oil-spill expert says he sees little chance that the wind or water currents will carry the Gulf of Mexico oil spill around Florida and northward to the East Coast, despite warnings issued by some sources.

"I think the risk of the oil reaching the East Coast is very remote and, if it did get here, the oil would be highly weathered [broken down]," said Malcolm Spaulding, a professor of ocean engineering at the University of Rhode Island and the head of an oil-spill modeling company called Applied Science Associates that is working on the spill for the U.S. government.

Spaulding spoke at a URI seminar Thursday because he said so many people were calling him with questions. He said more information is needed on volumes of oil and the composition of the oil that is blasting from three leaks at a pipe on the ocean floor. Efforts to block one leak Thursday are highly problematic, he said.

“This is brewing up to be a world-class spill,” Spaulding said.

Spaulding’s company has offices around the world that specialize in oil-spill monitoring as well as hazards planning, defense and security issues and offshore energy. He said he has been asked not to talk about the specific services being provided for the Gulf of Mexico spill, but lawyers approved the following:

“ASA is supporting [the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s] oil-spill natural resource damage assessment team of the Office of Responses and Restoration and is coordinating with NOAA on environmental, chemical and biological data collection. ASA also supports the U.S. Coast Guard with the Environmental Data Server (EDS) that aggregates meteorological and oceanographic conditions that are used for forecast modeling.”

Spaulding has been interviewed by reporters from Time magazine, the Associated Press, Univision and many overseas news organizations.

Ironically, he said the crew on the Deepwater Horizon mobile-drilling platform were preparing to give up on the well they had drilled 18,000 feet into the ocean bottom. They were drilling in water that was a mile deep, through an 8-inch steel pipe.

On April 20, a highly energized blast of gas and oil and water blew up from the pipe. A series of blowout preventers, designed as shutoff valves at the bottom of the pipe, or riser, failed to function. Something on the platform, possibly a diesel generator, ignited the gas. Eleven workers were killed.

Spaulding showed pictures of the spectacular fire that rescue workers put out with streams of water.

Two days after the blowout, British Petroleum reported that 1,000 barrels of oil a day were being released. Five days later, the figure was expanded to 5,000 barrels a day. As of Thursday, a total figure of 4 million gallons was being cited.

The drilling platform sank to the sea floor. The pipe is also lying on the bottom, bent at several points and spewing oil from three points, Spaulding said.

The oil is like a mousse, Spaulding said. It’s really an emulsion that is 95- to 97-percent water.

Everyone wants to do something about the spill, Spaulding said, but all the alternatives have drawbacks.

Some want to burn the oil, but that is difficult because the oil is so diffused. And even when successful, it creates clouds of black smoke that would drift farther than the spill itself.

Surfactants have been used to break up the oil, but some of them are as toxic as the oil.

Placing booms can help protect marshes and bayous. But the problem, Spaulding said, is that if the current or waves pick up, booms fail catastrophically.

On Thursday, efforts were under way to lower a cofferdam over one of the leaks. To demonstrate the difficulty of that operation, Spaulding dangled a coffee can with a string from the end of a long pointer. Imagine lowering something like this for a mile, he said, without being able to see anything.

Working with other URI professors, Spaulding said, he has studied prevailing winds and tides and

concluded the spill will probably remain close to the coast rather than wash out to sea.

Why have things gone so badly?

“None of the risk analyses came close to identifying the problem,” Spaulding said. “We had a substantial failure of technology here. More than one system failed. The numbers here don’t look pretty. The best to hope for in a cleanup is 10-percent success.”

For more about Spaulding’s company, go to: [www.asascience.com/about/index.shtml](http://www.asascience.com/about/index.shtml). For more on the spill, go to: <http://deepwaterhorizon.noaa.gov>.

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