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URI professors says it's unlikely Gulf oil spill will reach East Coast

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News reports about tar balls on Key West beaches and the ever-spreading BP oil spill are causing some to worry that the oil could make its way around Florida and up the East Coast. But University of Rhode Island ocean engineering Prof. Malcolm L. Spaulding does not share those worries.

Spaulding, who is an international expert on oil spills and founder of a company, Applied Science Associates, that is working for the federal government on the BP spill, says there are several reasons why chances are remote that the spill could affect the East Coast.

He said no one has connected the Florida tar balls with the BP spill. (In fact, later Wednesday the Coast Guard said the tar balls were not part of the spill.)

He said the so-called Loop Current that could carry the spill around Florida is still many miles away from the bulk of the spill and it already extends as far north as it ever has in the last 10 years. If an eddy did form and break off and moved to the north, it would then flow west, away from Florida, based on past observations.

And if oil did eventually make its way around Florida, the Gulf Stream could carry it north for awhile, but near Cape Hatteras it pulls further from the coast and begins crossing the Atlantic Ocean, Spaulding said. Occasionally, he said, an eddy breaks off and approaches the coast. So an entire sequence of unusual events would have to occur to bring any oil toward the Northeast.

Finally, as devastating as the spill appears to be in the Gulf of Mexico, if it eventually flowed into the Atlantic the concentrations that remained would be small, Spaulding said.

"If it gets here, it would be in the form of tar balls," Spaulding said. "The toxic fractions of the oil would be gone. Typically, the tar balls would be sealed with a coating of sediment or seaweed. They would be thumb-sized."

"We shouldn't spend time worrying about the East Coast, we should worry about the Gulf Coast," said Spaulding in an interview.

He made similar comments in a presentation to the URI community two weeks ago, after being interviewed by numerous news organizations and others.

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