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## Flying Over the Oil Spill, Hearing About the Response Effort

Yesterday I arrived in New Orleans to join NRDC's on-the-ground team and see firsthand the impacts of the massive and still-uncontrolled, still flowing oil spill from Deepwater Horizon. Quickly we head up and over the wetlands in a helicopter, and the impression I got throughout the flight, from takeoff to landing, is that the coast of Louisiana is the work horse for the oil and gas industry.

The wetlands were emerald colored, snow-white egrets flew against the lush green and a bald eagle flew by as we skimmed across the Delta heading for the open water. Wildlife abounded: one island was covered with brown pelicans, a nesting area for thousands.

Yet evidence of the industry marred the natural landscape everywhere: jack boats, well heads, helicopter pads, and service boats heading further out. We saw channels dredged for pipelines and oil tanks sitting on higher ground.

And down below, we watched the latest industrial scars in the water, seeing variations in the color and texture and mixing of oily tendrils flowing with the currents further and further to the west. We were tracking a NOAA map of where some of the oil had floated west of the accident site, nearly 100 miles west.

This oil had traveled far and was still moving, mixing into the water column, dispersing into the air, on a journey with unpredictable consequences to coastal and marine life and those whose livelihoods depend on it.

Our flyover revealed the scale of the spill and the immense area now at risk. The damage here is likely to be severe, and the full extent remains unknown. What we do know is that within this expanse we're looking down upon – many people's livelihoods are at-risk. It's for this reason that everyone here is worried. That much is clear the moment you touch down in the region.

And we know many species here are in danger. NRDC's marine and wildlife experts have described the threatened species in their blogs: the birds, turtles and marine mammals, the fish including the bluefin tuna that spawn here. Noted fisheries biologist Daniel Pauly has a new audio slideshow at *OnEarth* reminding us that the phytoplankton and zooplankton--the food chain itself--is also at risk from the oil.

After our flight, we headed over to the Coast Guard Command Center to meet with Admiral Mary Landry and representatives from NOAA, MMS and BP. Although we didn't meet with the EPA, Administrator Jackson is on the ground this week, as citizens share their concerns about the impact of dispersants, air quality issues, and what health risks go along with massive amounts of petroleum being released into the environment.

This oil spill is massive, and so is the response effort. It is designed to do three things.

**1. Secure the source.** As everyone watching the news knows, this is an ongoing effort--and not yet successful. Doug Suttles, BP's chief operating officer for exploration and production, described to us the containment efforts, ranging from the vessel they tried to place over the weekend to the smaller "top hat" with a pipe attached that they are attempting to place now, to a "junk shot" where they try to stop the flow by plugging the well, to the relief well that will take up to 90 days to complete. All these efforts will happen concurrently.

**2. Contain the oil.** What was clear from these conversations is that everyone involved in the cleanup effort is doing a lot of on-the-ground learning. The scale, depth, and distance of this spill make it unique. Placing 1 million feet of booms, burning the oil, using dispersants, and skimming are all efforts to reduce the damage. The guiding principal is to protect resources at greatest risk. One action may benefit one resource while harming another. Dispersants may be the best hope to prevent oil from reaching shore and coating critical wetlands habitat and wildlife species. But what could be happening in the water column itself is another matter, one little understood. NOAA provides its scientific expertise and judgment to the Coast Guard, MMS and BP as each action is taken. It's a balancing act--that much was clear.

**3. Foster recovery.** A separate division at NOAA is already beginning to plan that effort.

In between our flight and the conversations with officials, I have been placing calls to Washington, working to ensure that clean energy and climate legislation is just that--a new energy pathway that ensures we will not again experience anything like the Deepwater Horizon blow out.

*Photos taken by NRDC, [click for captions and more photos](#)*

