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An Oil Spill Grows in Brooklyn

By ALEX PRUD'HOMME

WITH an estimated 210,000 gallons of oil spilling from the Deepwater Horizon site every day — for a total of some 3.3 million gallons, so far — the disaster in the Gulf of Mexico may eventually prove to be the largest oil spill in American history.

But New Yorkers forget, or don't know, that a much larger oil spill sits in our own backyard: an estimated 17 million to 30 million gallons of oil, benzene, naptha and other carcinogenic chemicals pollute Newtown Creek and a 55-acre, 25-foot-deep swath of soil in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

People don't often think of urban creeks as biodiverse waterways, but Newtown Creek was once a rich tidal estuary popular among hunters and fishermen. Starting in the 1870s, however, Standard Oil and other refineries began spilling or dumping excess fuels and toxic chemicals into the water or onto the soil, slowly poisoning the ecosystem. For years, people who hung their clothes out to dry found them darkened by chemical fumes. Today, Newtown Creek is a dead zone: when a dolphin was spotted in the creek in March, experts did not rejoice. They worried about its health.

Despite an underground explosion fed by accumulated oil and gas in 1950, as well as persistent health problems among the creek's neighbors, it wasn't until 1978 that officials recognized the problem. That summer a Coast Guard helicopter on a routine patrol noticed a huge black oil plume spewing from the side of Newtown Creek, heading into the East River and New York Harbor. A containment boom was set out, and workers collected 200,000 gallons of degraded gasoline, fuel oil and chemicals, some of which dated to 1948.

Today a viscous rainbow sheen floats on its surface, and the area around it is redolent of hydrocarbons. Although Greenpoint has a lower overall cancer rate than much of the city, it has one of the highest incidences of certain cancers, like leukemia in children and stomach cancer in adults. The creek was designated a Superfund site in 2009.

The spill has also rendered the Brooklyn-Queens Aquifer, once a valuable store of freshwater, undrinkable. The aquifer serves as a recharge zone for the groundwater stores in southeastern Queens that could provide an important backup supply for the city in a drought.

Documents unearthed by local activists show a history of regulators looking the other way to

protect oil companies from liability for poisoning the creek. Fortunately, pressure from citizens' groups and city and state lawsuits have wrung a certain amount of compensation from BP, ExxonMobil and other companies accused of being behind the spill. In 2009, a federal jury found ExxonMobil liable for contaminating the groundwater near the creek, awarding the city $104.7 million.

Yet that's nowhere near enough to clean up the site or compensate Greenpoint residents. Nor is the Superfund designation likely to bring immediate improvement in the creek: years of study will be needed before any action can be taken, and the Superfund money can be used only to remove toxic material from the shore and sediments; other water-quality problems aren't eligible. In the long run, the only real solution may be to excavate the entire polluted zone and replace it with clean fill.

As President Obama condemns the "cozy relationship" between federal regulators and Big Oil, we might question why New York regulators and the companies charged with polluting Newtown Creek took so long to acknowledge the problem.

We tend to think of oil spills as dramatic events — a sinking ship, a burning rig. So it's easy to forget that across the country, hundreds of spills, many left over from a less regulated time, continue to poison groundwater and leak toxic fumes. Instead of letting the Gulf spill divert our attention yet again from slow-moving disasters like Newtown Creek, we should take it as an impetus to address problems much closer to home.

Alex Prud'homme is writing a book about the future of the use of freshwater.

Oil spills are leakages or spillage of petroleum and their byproducts into the environment particularly onto the surface of large water bodies such as oceans, lakes and rivers as a result of human activities. For this reason, oil spill is regarded as a form of pollution as the term is mostly applied to define spillage of oil in marine systems. Oil spills may occur on land as well, but the most documented incidences are those that happen in marine areas. Since the 1960â€™s, oil spills have been recorded as major environmental problems caused by increased deep sea oil production and explorations, Related:The Brooklyn Oil Spill: A Timeline Mother Jones.Â But unlike the Exxon Valdez, this one has been allowed to grow and fester for half a century, directly below a residential area. Even in the neighborhoodâ€”an old-time blue-collar community pocked with hipster enclavesâ€”many people donâ€™t know why the air smells like gasoline on rainy days. â€œThis is a working-class community with a dirty creek in a part of Brooklyn no one really cares about,â€ Seggos says.Â In 1978, a Coast Guard helicopter spotted an oil slick on the creek. Investigating further, the Guard discovered the 55-acre monster that had by then massed beneath the city. Chemical analysis fingered Mobil as the source, and again the company said it wasnâ€™t at fault.