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## [Scientist provides update on oil spill research](#)

May 4th, 2012 | [0](#)

By DOTTY NIST

“As a scientist, I don’t think I can ever say that we can rest easy,” scientist Richard Snyder’s told community members as he addressed them two

years after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

Snyder, a professor with the University of West Florida's Center for Environmental Diagnostics and Bioremediation, was featured speaker at the South Walton Community Council (SWCC) community forum on April 25 at the Coastal Branch Library.

Snyder was one of the first scientists to begin research and monitoring on Northwest Florida beaches in response to the massive April 2010 oil spill. In May 2010 he became a lead researcher for the Oil Spill Academic Task Force, which was established as a partnership of 15 Florida universities.

There was much in Snyder's presentation to be optimistic about. In his judgment the Florida Panhandle got relatively little impact from the oil spill other than the economic impact, although he admitted that tarballs remain in the area. More of those are seen when there are disturbances to the gulf such as storms, he said.

Even samplings done in the area of the spill show that its remnants and the chemicals associated with it are "pretty much gone," Snyder reported. "The bacteria has cleared them all up," he said.

He explained that there is a long history of oil in the Gulf of Mexico due to the hundreds of natural oil seeps its floor—and that natural oil slicks are not uncommon. They are consumed by naturally-occurring microbes that live in the gulf.

However, Snyder explained, an oil spill of the magnitude of the Deepwater Horizon spill "overloads the system."

Snyder said the Corexit dispersant that was used in response to the oil spill is also gone. The dispersant was sodium doctyl suflosuccinate, the same chemical as Dulcolax, a stool softener, he noted. While there are advantages and disadvantages to the use of dispersant in connection with an oil spill, there was no good choice to be made with such a large spill, Snyder commented.

He said that, while the dispersant broke the oil down into droplets to help the naturally-occurring molecules digest it more easily and also helped keep oil from coming onshore, the Corexit also killed off a "huge chunk" of the plankton that is food for many marine organisms. However, he said, plankton has the ability to rebound.

Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), which are found in oil, have been one of the toxins that scientists have been most concerned about in the gulf as a result of the oil spill. Snyder said that testing in northwest Florida in the fall after the spill found only parts per billion of the substance in water and sand. However, in coquina clam tissue, PAHs were found at a level of 100-fold of the four parts per billion found in the sand, he said.

The scientists are continuing to monitor the coquinas, he said, due to the clams being a very sensitive indicator of PAHs.

A big challenge, Snyder explained, is that the gulf has not been studied well and no background data exists with which to compare the findings. "Up to now, we haven't been able to get the monitoring here that is routine all over the world," he said.

Further research and monitoring will reveal, he noted, whether the PAH values found in the coquinas will “bound around” or drop off. In the absence of background data, Snyder commented, the best that can be done may be to establish a baseline.

Snyder said previously even information on what drives the gulf’s fisheries has been lacking. Scientists are now looking at what fish may now be missing, although it is difficult to substantiate cause and effect in these instances, he revealed. What the long-term impacts of the spill will be on marine life is still to be determined, he said.

Now that attention is on the gulf as a result of the oil spill, the problem of the area being poorly studied is being corrected, Snyder said.

“Understanding the system I think is the big gain,” he told attendees.

While emphasizing that his research is independent of BP, Snyder noted that BP has committed \$500 million for research in connection with the oil spill. This year a portion of those funds are being advanced for research on the marine food chain, he noted.

From \$5 billion to \$15 billion in fines is expected to be due from BP in connection with the Clean Water Act, Snyder continued, depending on whether negligence is proved with regard to the spill. Normally these funds would go into the general fund, but there is an effort in the U.S. Congress to direct most of them to the gulf coast region.

Snyder expressed concern about the use of the funds if this does happen. It was his hope that they would be placed in an endowment, which would make them available in perpetuity.

In response to a question, Snyder commented that the lesions and other abnormalities seen in fish soon after the oil spill are not being observed at this time. In response to another question, he said he enjoys eating fish and other seafood often.

Vertebrates deal well with any PAHs in their food, he noted, as these substances are processed by the liver.

Asked about an increase in dolphin deaths, Snyder said scientists are confident that there is an oil spill connection with these incidences, since they are occurring with dolphins that would have been born near the time of the oil spill. However, he said, it will still be difficult to prove in legal action against BP that such a connection exists.

Information on SWCC events and activities is available on the organization’s web site, [www.southwaltoncc.org](http://www.southwaltoncc.org).

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