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## Oil spill reports understate damage

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While many lament the devastation caused by Rhode Island's "worst [oil] spill in history," there are discrepancies between the actual damage and accounts by Rhode Island and federal officials.

Some 2,000 workers were affected by the spill, which killed at least 12,000 lobsters in one day alone. The Department of Environmental Management (DEM) counted 203 birds dead, and 64 others suffered noticeably. A seal and a sea turtle were also killed. Another seal and sea turtle were excluded as casualties, though reasons for exclusion were not given.

According to University of Rhode Island oceanographer Virginia Lee, officials only focused on the surface slick. She said, "The real issue is below the surface. People have this image that its surface oil. It's not. It's mixed into the water. That's the lethal part."

URI scientists reported that the absorbed oil hung close to the shoreline roughly along four miles of national wildlife refuges. They estimated that toxicity levels near the barge were high enough to kill at least 50 percent of the lobster population there within 3 days, and that 40 to 50 percent of the toxins were absorbed into the water. According to the URI scientists, the underwater "cloud" covered an area of about eight square miles confirming that oil had penetrated from the surface to the bottom, 40 feet below. Winds spread the surface slick over an area of about 144 square miles, according to Applied Science Associates Engineers.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials took "tissue samples from dead lobsters to determine whether they died from oil exposure or the violent storm on Friday night."

Lee reported that tissues of lobster washed up on the first few days of the spill contained high concentrations of hydrocarbons, thus discrediting early attempts to blame shellfish mortality on the weather.

But on Feb. 1, Coast Guard spokesman Fred Alger told *Valley Optimist* reporter Catherine Hines the large numbers of lobsters washed up were the result of the storm.

Marcel Valois of R.I.'s Economic Development Corporation told people at a local Town council meeting that "South County is the engine that drives the state's tourism business and we are very concerned that national exposure of the oil spill will cause people to change their minds about coming to visit here."

Valois said the state intends to "aggressively" begin a national campaign to persuade people "that this problem will go away" and "will leave behind no negative effects" either on tourism or on seafood.

The R.I. health department embargoed 43,000 pounds of lobsters and 9,000 pounds of crab, after oil-contaminated salt water was pumped into tanks holding them.

“We are extremely lucky not to have a catastrophe on our hands,” said Spence Conley, assistant regional director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Evidence is beginning to emerge that confirms that petroleum exposure – home-heating oil in particular – is more lethal to health and environment than industry apologists say.

On the day of the spill, local residents Michael Cabral and his girlfriend were treated for exhaustion, lightheadedness and burning sensations in throat and tightness in their chests due to fumes. Their concerns about long-term effects of the inhalation of toxins, which they said also saturated their clothes, were dismissed by officials.

Virginia Weaver, an occupational environmental physician with Johns Hopkins School of Public Health in Maryland, said that the chemicals in home-heating oil are considered “standard toxins” which “have only short term side-effects.” She also said that “little research has been done on long-term effects of exposure.”

Keith Kvenvolden of the U.S. Geological Survey, who is investigating oil residues found near the Exxon Valdez spill, told the *New York Times*, “the degradation products of oil spills certainly have long residence times, in this case 30 years.”

The North Cape accident in Cape Cod spilled over a million gallons of toxins close to shore, in a pounding surf, which drove toxins into the water column, along the shore of sensitive ecological wetlands and tidal marshes, breeding grounds for scallops, quahogs, winter flounder and sand lance, a food source for many dishes higher up on the food chain.

“Yeah, it’s all cleaned up,” said DEM officer Sheila Desaro, “that’s why there’s lots and lots of dead lobsters and shellfish washed up on the beach. The repercussions from this will last a long, long time. We’ve got decimated populations of shellfish and lobsters. I don’t agree that there’s no impact, or that it’s short term. This should never have happened.”