Breathing the filth: Hydrocarbons in the air are more toxic than oil in the gulf

July 10 2010, By Gary Polakovic

What a relief it will be when the oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico gets plugged, ending the colossal mess caused by gushing crude. Or will it?

Once the spill stops, oil will resume flowing as it always has, to be burned in engines, released to the sky and breathed deep into our bodies. We know now that these emissions contribute to a longer-term and perhaps ultimately more dangerous form of pollution -- [climate change](#).

As deadly as the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe is, the pollution pales in comparison with the hydrocarbons spilling into the air over our cities, farms and highways. The oil spill ranks as the nation's worst environmental disaster only if you ignore the great ongoing spill in the sky.

Air pollution is so ubiquitous that we accept it as part of the modern urban tableau with little fuss. Smog doesn't rivet attention as it did 62 years ago when an inversion layer trapped pollutants in Donora, Pa., killing 20 people in a few days and sickening thousands, or when smog was hazardous for everyone most of the time in Los Angeles. Images of a blazing oil rig and glop-coated birds skew our sense of proportion and risk.

The numbers reveal that the dangers we accept as familiar are worse in the long haul than sudden disasters such as the Deepwater Horizon.

Experts estimate that the oil spill now spews as much as 60,000 barrels

of crude a day, equivalent to about 8,820 tons.

Californians alone disgorge about 2,215 tons of hydrocarbons into the air every day; what Deepwater Horizon does to the Gulf of Mexico in one day, we do to the air in four days.

It takes the smoggy Los Angeles region less than two days to match the pollution the Deepwater Horizon blowout produces in one, if you count the 4,740 tons per day of various emissions from combusted fossil fuel such as carbon monoxide, microscopic particles, nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds.

Worst-case estimates place the total oil spilled in the gulf at about 126 million gallons over two months. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates the country disgorges that much hydrocarbon pollution to the air in 10 days.

If TV cameras swooped in on Southern California emergency rooms during summer's smoggy days, they would find, instead of dead fish or birds, asthmatic children and elderly patients gasping for breath. A recent study by researchers at Cal State Fullerton shows that at least 3,860 people die prematurely from smog annually in California.

If you could somehow film events inside a placenta, you might see the moment when carbon monoxide gas and ozone -- both directly related to fossil fuel combustion -- cause a fetus in a smoggy city to be three times more likely to develop heart defects than other babies, according to research by UCLA and the California Birth Defects Monitoring Program.

The economic losses resulting from air pollution, measured in missed days of school, lost workdays or healthcare costs, number in the billions of dollars. Yet, unlike the $20 billion restitution fund for victims of the

Gulf of Mexico spill, no remuneration exists for victims of hydrocarbons dumped in the air. While the goal in the gulf is to stop the mess, the goal for the air is to limit the discharge to a conscionable level of damage.

It's true that clean-air regulations have led to substantial reductions in smog-forming emissions released to the sky. There are tangible benefits as a result.

But the more we learn about the effects of the great spill in the sky, the more we learn how dangerous the emissions are. Ultrafine particles -- so tiny thousands could fit on the dot of this "i" -- from diesel combustion have been linked to heart attacks, birth defects and cancer. And black carbon, or soot, from diesel exhaust is proving to be a major greenhouse pollutant with a unique heat-trapping ability to settle on and heat ice sheets like an electric blanket.

Unlike in the past, when clean-air laws had broad bipartisan support, lately the political will to tackle the great spill in the sky has faltered. President Obama's recent Oval Office speech invoked a national military emergency for oil spill response, yet the country seems more willing to unite against enemies abroad than to respond to threats to our environmental health and safety.

To wit, 47 U.S. senators sought to block the EPA from regulating greenhouse gas emissions last month. Not a single Republican lawmaker supported the energy bill in the Senate, and only eight GOP lawmakers supported the House-approved bill reckoning with greenhouse gas pollutants earlier this year. Half the country was chanting "Drill, baby, drill!" just 18 months ago while Obama and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger called for expanded offshore drilling.

California voters will consider an oil industry-sponsored ballot measure Nov. 2 to suspend the state's pioneering program for a modest reduction

in global warming pollutants, a program that has the potential for a renaissance of clean-tech innovation, economic growth and gains against multiple air pollutants.

Will the oil spill in the gulf become an inflection point similar the 1969 spill off the Santa Barbara coast, which ignited a groundswell of environmental support? Not until we gain a sense of proportion about all the hydrocarbons we discharge, and a reckoning with our petroleum dependency.

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