Preventing Spills from Vessels Fatality File

Cleanup workers got sick after a deepwater Horizon oil spill. They want BP to pay.

The oil washed ashore every day, globs of tarlike ooze blighting sugar-white sand beaches. Rodney Boblitt’s job was to report it.

A special agent for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, he was assigned to patrol 14 miles of Panhandle beaches on an all-terrain vehicle, alerting cleanup crews to new slicks from the BP Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion.

His 16-hour shifts started at dawn. The air felt greasy; the ATV splashed up oil, he said, soaking his clothes, gun belt, hat, and boots.

“The smells were horrendous,” he recalled. “Like the ocean mixed with chemicals.”

About 4 million barrels of crude oil seeped into the Gulf of Mexico and 11 people died in the April disaster, the largest marine oil spill in history. Tens of thousands of workers were hired to clean sludge on beaches, mangroves, and dunes across Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and the Florida Panhandle.

Boblitt said he wasn’t the same when he returned to his regular job after three months in the Panhandle. He struggled to concentrate. Knowledge gleaned from years of service eluded him. Physically demanding work caused him to shake.

Within two years, he said, he’d deteriorated so much he no longer trusted himself to handle airboats, personal watercraft, and his firearm safely.

He took early retirement. He was 43.

More than a decade after the disaster, cleanup workers are still reporting cases of respiratory illnesses, skin disorders, dizziness, and other medical issues they say were caused by the spill. Their health struggles are documented in more than 5,000 lawsuits filed against BP in federal courts in Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida, with some workers reporting illnesses diagnosed as recently as 2020.

BP has so far set aside nearly $70 billion for the ecological disaster, including $11.6 billion to businesses affected by the spill, according to its website.

Payouts for cleanup workers' medical claims make up a tiny portion of that restitution. According to a 2019 report from the court-appointed claims administrator, BP paid roughly $67 million to 22,833 workers to settle a class-action lawsuit, an average of about $3,000 each.

The petroleum giant also agreed in the settlement that cleanup workers could seek compensation for exposure symptoms that emerged later. But BP attorneys are aggressively contesting the new lawsuits — despite government-funded studies showing that these workers have higher-than-normal incidences of skin conditions, respiratory issues, and heart ailments.