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This Week's News

Web posted Monday, April 29, 2002

BP eliminates tiny tanker hitchhikers

By James MacPherson
Journal Reporter

While oil companies go to great lengths to protect the environment, Simon Lisiecki is the first to admit that it's strange for them to want to find a way to kill tiny sea creatures.

But that's exactly what BP Amoco PLC has been doing in conjunction with the government and an environmental watchdog group.

Lisiecki, BP's manager of marine business developments, said the company has spent about \$2.5 million on a device designed to destroy foreign marine species in the ballast water of tankers plying the waters of Prince William Sound.

To kill potentially harmful new species that may get an unwanted foothold in Alaska waters, BP for the last year has been bubbling ozone through the ballast water on the double-hull tanker Tonsina.

"It works. This thing kills the little critters. It's as simple as that," said Lisiecki.

The system killed most bacteria and zooplankton after a 10-hour dose of ozone, Lisiecki said.

Larger shrimp survival varied, while crabs were largely unaffected, other than making them a little "groggy," Lisiecki said.

Larger creatures, while still microscopic, were taken out of ballast systems by strainers, Lisiecki said.



A BP Amoco PLC worker checks on a device designed to destroy foreign marine species in the ballast water of the company's oil tanker Tonsina.

PHOTO/James MacPherson/AJOC

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Ozone, which consists of three oxygen atoms in a single molecule, is used to disinfect water.

In Los Angeles, ozone has been used instead of chlorine for more than 20 years, Lisiecki said, adding it also is used to treat hazardous waste, industrial wastewater and contaminated groundwater.

Lisiecki said ozone-treated ballast water is safe to be pumped back into seawater.

The system, developed by an independent company, Nutech O3, incorporates seven miles of pipe that percolated ozone through the ship's 15 ballast tanks.

While the system worked on the Tonsina, the challenge now for the oil company is to make the device portable, cheaper, more reliable and simpler to operate, Lisiecki said.

Nonindigenous invasive species, according to Lisiecki, can be any living organism, plant or disease that is brought from one part of the world to another. Under some conditions and without natural predators, the foreign marine species could take hold in new waters, causing dire environmental and economic effects.

Lisiecki points to the European zebra mussel that took over the Great Lakes after being transported in ships' ballast water from the Caspian Sea. The mussels have clogged cooling pipes in power utilities, causing millions of dollars of damage.

Harmful marine species are most often transported from one region to another in ships' ballast.

Currently most ballast water is exchanged at sea, where fewer plankton are present than in coastal waters.

Tankers bound for Valdez usually take on water from the Puget Sound in Washington or ports in San Francisco or Long Beach, Calif. Ballast water stabilizes a ship and lowers the draft of a vessel so its propellers are underwater.

"In the San Francisco Bay area, a new species is introduced every three months," Lisiecki said in a report to industry officials. "With the water temperature on the West Coast being roughly the same as in Prince William Sound, the concern is when one of those nasty little beasts ends up on one of our tankers.

"The Port of Valdez is the single largest receiver of ballast in the U.S., delivered by a small fleet of dedicated tankers. If something is found, we've got a problem."

So far, studies have found that no harmful species have taken root in Prince William Sound.

Marilyn Leland, deputy director of the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council, said there is a risk of alien species being introduced in Alaska waters, as has happened in other parts of the world.

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Some 400 alien species have been re-established in North America, according to Lisiecki.

"We don't know if we don't have the critters, and we don't know if we do," Leland said.

RCAC is an oil industry watchdog group funded by Alyeska Pipeline Service Co. RCAC has helped with the ozone research and grants totaling about \$500,000. The group also has a program to monitor tankers' ballast systems and the waters of Prince William Sound.

Lisiecki said the system will continue to be evaluated during the next few months. No decision has been made about incorporating the system on all of the company's tankers.

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