

Bonus: Oil Spill Update No. 1

The Gulf Podcast

Introduction

[Dr. Jen Brown]: Hi Gulf Podcast listeners. This is Jen. It is January 6, 2023, and I have a brief update for you, so I did manage to talk today to the communication director at Flint Hills Resources, and I'm going to play that interview for you shortly but just a couple of announcements. First off, oil is still washing up at North Beach, University Beach, and elsewhere. Just so you know, it looks like yellowish gloop, for lack of a better term, and it's washing up still in like tiny balls and larger globs. It smells pretty bad and if you see it, please do not touch it with your bare hands. Leave it alone. Instead, what you should be doing is calling the hotline for such oil spill and pollution events and this is a Texas multiagency hotline, and the number is (800) 832-8224. That's (800) 832-8224, or you could also contact the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Kills and Spills, and especially if you see dead birds or fish, you should contact them and their 24-hour hotline out of Austin is (512) 389-4848. As a heads up, the city today finally notified residents that oil has been washing up at University Beach as we knew from just being out there the last few days this week and generally the cleanup efforts are still on-going. Now, this next interview is just a short interview. I'm going to play it for you entirely unedited just to give you all a little bit more information from the Flint Hills' perspective of what's going on there. Hopefully, it will answer some questions and if you have any other questions, I'm going to be contacting them again next week, feel free to email me or contact me through our social media channels on Facebook or Instagram if you have any questions you want me to ask Flint Hills or elsewhere, and I'm hoping to gather more interviews from the city of Corpus Christi, from other people and agencies, so we can have just more information, more transparency about this oil spill. Okay, here's the interview unedited. Thank you all for listening.

Interview

[Brown]: Okay, we are recording. This is Jen Brown. It is January 6, 2023. Um, can I have you say your name and your title please?

[Andy Saenz]: Sure, my name is Andy Saenz, and I'm the Public Affairs Director for Flint Hills Resources.

[Brown]: Okay, thanks for talking to me today.

[Saenz]: Sure.

[Brown]: Just very briefly, I read in the news the report that Flint Hills Resources has been saying the cleanup is "largely complete," but I'm seeing a lot of videos on Instagram and seeing

other reports that there's oil still washing up on our beaches. Do you think you could just give me an update on like where you all are with the cleanup?

[Saenz]: We're everywhere, I mean, at all parts around the Texas area where people are seeing this type of possible contamination, and so we've been working very closely with the Coast Guard, the General Land Office, Texas Parks and Wildlife, several other federal or local state authorities, and they are actually in the field with us where we are getting reports of any contamination that may still be around. When we get reports, we send crews immediately. Most of the time, the Coast Guard and the GLO is with us to verify that it is what it is and then they don't leave until we finish cleaning up the site, so we've been getting fewer and fewer sightings of any possible contaminations related to this issue, and that's why we think we're getting close to completing the work. We'll never leave the area. We're always going to be here and if there are follow up reports that come in from the public next week or the week after, we will continue to respond.

[Brown]: Um, when I was out at the University Beach across the bay by A&M-Corpus the other day, it was Wednesday about eleven a.m., there were about six contractors out there cleaning up. They wouldn't talk to me or give me any information. There were no other like General Land Office or anyone else involved, Coast Guard, that sort of thing. Um, can you tell me how many contractors are working for you and why aren't they allowed to discuss their cleanup efforts?

[Saenz]: Well, the crews only know what's right in front of them. They don't have the big picture, so they're in no position to report to you where we are on the cleanup, how many spots we've taken, what we've picked up, what's been identified and what's not been identified. It's not their position or responsibility to answer those types of questions.

[Brown]: Oh.

[Saenz]: That's why we ask people to come and talk to us.

[Brown]: Okay, because I was just asking like what they're cleaning up, how much they are individually cleaning up, and they wouldn't talk to me. Um, why—

[Saenz]: That's correct. That's their role. They've got a real job to do, and—

[Brown]: —fair—

[Saenz]: —it is to focus on their efforts, and that's what they were told to do, is just focus on the efforts. And so, to answer you, "Yeah, we're doing a cleanup work," and that's all they need to say because again, they don't have the big picture. They're workers, that in some cases, are working for a subcontractor of Flint Hills Resources.

[Brown]: Okay, got you. How many subcontractors and how many employees would you say?

[Saenz]: So, at the height of the cleanup, which was several days ago, we had 286 contractors. There's probably another forty or fifty full-time employees from Flint Hills Resources and then there's staff from the Coast Guard, the Texas General Land Office, Texas Parks and Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, the city, the county, and there were a lot of people that responded to this event.

[Brown]: Why hasn't the public been notified by the appearance of oil across the bay and at University Beach?

[Saenz]: The public has been notified a variety of times throughout the day to a variety of different resources. The operation center had representatives from the city, the county, and the state that were imbedded with us. We put out daily press releases, emergency coordinators, also forwarded our information to elected officials, all the jurisdictions, and they themselves put out press releases like the city of Corpus Christi, the mayor of Ingleside on the Bay, so information went out the traditional ways. We also pushed interviews with television stations, with newspapers, online, just about everybody who called, we tried to return all their phone calls, so—

[Brown]: —yeah—

[Saenz]: —we did as best as we could to get the information out that was timely and that was accurate.

[Brown]: Okay, can I just verify then that the city of Corpus Christi knew that there were oil cleanup efforts at University Beach because that was one location that hasn't showed up in any of their press releases?

[Saenz]: You'd have to ask them about it. They had every bit of information we had, they knew every single cleanup area, they saw every single report we got. Again, they were imbedded with us and our command center, and it was completely transparent. They saw and heard everything, so every time a report would come in, the information would go out, strike team would pull out, GLO and the Coast Guard would go in after us to verify that the work was done. After the area was cleaned, the Coast Guard would come in and GLO, and they would sign off. They would do an assessment of the area, and they would sign off that it was clean.

[Brown]: Have there been any studies done about all of the dead jellyfish that have been washing up on the bay?

[Saenz]: What I'm getting from the university is that those jellyfish were affected because of the weather. This is a natural phenomenon that had nothing to do with any kind of oil contamination at this incident. That's a natural phenomenon at this time of the year.

[Brown]: And so—

[Saenz]: Now, ask the experts. Don't ask me, ask them.

[Brown]: Okay, but you are—they have been doing studies—because there were other spots, not just at the university where there were a bunch of dead jellyfish.

[Saenz]: I've been in Corpus when I've seen them having cold events, and I'm not an expert but in my own eyes, I have seen many jellyfish that turn up this way at this time of the year and my understanding is it's weather related. I'm not an expert, don't claim to be.

[Brown]: Okay, so you just don't know if there's been specific, like, they're dissecting jellyfish or anything?

[Saenz]: I have no clue, and that's not my area. I stay in my lane.

[Brown]: Right. Okay, can we go back a little bit, and maybe could you tell me a little bit about the discovery of the oil spill and the reporting issues, and then can you tell me why the numbers changed from the amount of gallons and—

[Saenz]: —Sure—

[Brown]: —how those numbers are estimated?

[Saenz]: Absolutely. So, we got a report on Christmas Eve that there was some sheen in the water, so we immediately put staff looking around our dock and looking in the water, and we did see some product on the water under one of our docks. After further investigations, we saw a release point, a point from where the oil was leaking or being released. Immediately, we shut down the pipe, clamped it, and then we boomed the area. So, when we boomed the area, that was to keep it around our docks. And so, we did a visual search of our area, and everywhere where we saw any kind of product, we boomed it so that we could pick it out. Two or three hours later, we had boats in the water, and they began picking out that product. At that time, in the middle of the night, we made an estimate of what we could see and what we thought had been released. That estimate was reached in cooperation with the Coast Guard and the Texas General Land Office, and it looked like, to all the agencies that were there, that it was confined in that specific area, and we did an estimate based on calculations and science and math and however it works, and our estimate was at that time that we felt that ninety barrels was the amount. As we continued our cleanup, we thought that we had a good handle on it but then oil started showing up outside of that zone. In the meantime, we always—well, after the incident happened, we were doing our own investigation. We did our forensic work. We checked computers. We checked the instruments on the tanks and on the pipes. Four days later we had to do a re-estimate because obviously we thought we ended up with more than what was initially reported. We immediately contacted the Coast Guard, the GLO, explained the science, explained the math, showed them the charts, the tanks, the pressure valves, everything, and we all agreed that the new amount was going to be 335, so that's how, why the numbers

changed because it was an estimate when we first started but now we have a good handle on exactly the amount that was released.

[Brown]: Okay, and about how much do you think has already been cleaned up out of that?

[Saenz]: It's very hard to determine. We're still analyzing that number, so there's a bunch of different ways you can recover oil. You can recover what's on top of the water, which we did that with our skimmers and boats and vacuum trucks. There's oil that impacted the soil not only around the Ingleside area but across, a little bit further across in an area called DNPA10, so we collected that, but, of course, it was mixed with sand and dirt and seaweed, so you can only do a rough calculation of how much oil is compared to the rest of the products that are in there, the rest of the products that you see there, and so it's very, very difficult. At this point right now, I mean, we're measuring all of that. We're measuring how many bags of sand we got with oil. We obviously know how many gallons we've picked up with the skimmers and the boats. Some of this oil because of the way it acts once it hits the environment, it changes its compounds. It stops looking like one thing and turns into another. At one point it looked like popcorn and then it looked like a sheen and different oil acts differently depending on the weather and the temperature, so there's a point where you can never recover a hundred percent of what was lost, so we're making those calculations now, and those will be in our final reports to the regulatory authorities.

[Brown]: When are those final reports due?

[Saenz]: I have no timetable. When they're due, when all the information is gathered.

[Brown]: Okay, no timetable. And who do those reports go to, what agencies?

[Saenz]: All the regulatory agencies, that's the U.S. Coast Guard, Texas General Land Office, the Oil Spill Division, Texas Parks and Wildlife. I don't know who else. I'm sure we'll get contacted by other agencies and, of course, as I said before, we're being completely transparent, and we're cooperating with all the authorities who have questions about it.

[Brown]: Sure, sure, well, what else—I think we've covered a lot of information and questions that I had but what else would you like my listeners to know about this spill?

[Saenz]: Well, obviously that this is very regrettable. I mean, no leak is acceptable. That's not the company standard. That's not the standard for this industry. Obviously, we want to avoid this, but, obviously, weather was an influence that night, so we'll look at that, and we responded as quickly as we could, we brought as many resources as were needed, and we will get down to the bottom of the investigation to figure out what happened that night so that we can fix it, and it won't happen again.

[Brown]: And how long are these cleanup efforts going to be ongoing because it seems like—

[Saenz]: —As long as it takes.

[Brown]: —you know—

[Saenz]: —As long as it takes—

[Brown]: —I just—

[Saenz]: —there's no timetable. It's an open ended, it's an ongoing cleanup, and we understand that there are tides, there are winds, there are other weather conditions that are not under our control, and so there might be some remnants out there, and so if they show up, we will respond, and we will take care of it.

[Brown]: Okay, because I just, you know, in the last—like the report that the cleanup was largely complete and then seeing all of these videos of people finding oil in North Beach and University Beach and elsewhere, I was just wondering what the Flint Hills Resources was involved in, in terms of the cleanup that way.

[Saenz]: We will do it as long as it takes. If reports come up that there's been a new area found, we will respond.

[Brown]: So are you, at this point, only responding to reports or are you going around and you're actually looking out and monitoring places?

[Saenz]: We are, we are actively monitoring, and we have crews in the field. We have a good understanding what the Coast Guard and what the Port of Corpus Christi are all on the lookout and if we find something, we will respond.

[Brown]: Can you give me more details on that active monitoring, like how many people, where, when, what parts of the bay, that sort of thing?

[Saenz]: No because it fluctuates, and it's very mobile. It changes every day. It changes every hour.

[Brown]: Okay.

[Saenz]: So, I don't have a good—I don't have a good number on it.

[Brown]: What about just today then on this Friday, January 6th?

[Saenz]: I don't have a current number.

[Brown]: You don't?

[Saenz]: There's a lot of—there's just too many entities and personal that we have in the fields, Jen. I can't give you—I would be giving you a ballpark, a guessing number, and I don't want to do that.

[Brown]: Okay, if you do have a number do you think you can email it to me?

[Saenz]: Yeah, I'm not going to have one today. I may not even have one next week.

[Brown]: Okay.

[Saenz]: But somebody else is keeping track of all those recourses.

[Brown]: All right, well, do you mind if I check in again next week and maybe do another short interview?

[Saenz]: Sure, I may not be able to respond to you that quickly because we have other priorities, but I am trying to return every call from the media or the public or anybody else who wants information. That's how we do things.

[Brown]: Well, okay, great. Thank you so much for your time, Andy.

[Saenz]: You got it, Jen. Thank you.

[Brown]: Okay, bye.