

Waste From the Oil Spill: FAQs

1. With a partner, answer these questions to get an idea about what kind of debris is being picked up as part of cleaning up the Gulf and Gulf Coast. Make a prediction or guess if you don't know the answers to the questions.

a. What kind of waste is being removed from the Gulf and Gulf Coast? _____

b. How much of this waste has been removed? _____

c. Is the waste dangerous? _____

d. Where is all the waste going? _____

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2. Now compare the suggested answers to yours. Does anything about the answers surprise you? What did you learn?

a. What kind of waste is being removed from the Gulf and Gulf Coast?

- tar balls
- oil-soaked boom
- oil-stained sand
- oil-soaked sea grass
- medical waste used for wildlife rehabilitation
- rags, gloves, protective gear, and clothing used by cleanup workers

b. How much of this waste has been removed?

By the middle of August, 40,000 tons of “oily solids” have been carried away from the Gulf and the Gulf Coast.

c. Is the waste dangerous?

That depends on who you ask. The Miami Herald newspaper reported on August 3, 2010 that the Environmental Protection Agency doesn’t require waste from oil rigs to be treated as toxic. One oil-chemical hazard expert at Louisiana State University said that “At least 50 percent of the oil evaporates in the first week. And it’s the most volatile parts of the oil”—the parts that might cause cancer.

Environmentalists and people who live near the waste disagree. An environmental attorney for Earthjustice (a nonprofit environmental law firm) said, “There’s a genuine serious risk of poisoning the aquifer [underground water] years from now.”

d. Where is all the waste going?

According to the Miami Herald, “Under a 34-page waste management plan developed by the federal government, oily solid waste that reaches Gulf Coast beaches is bagged by BP contractors and transferred to area landfills.... The sites in use now are regular municipal landfills, not designed for hazardous waste.”

And that’s where the environmental injustice comes in.