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Health officials notify public of potential offshore oil burning operations

OKALOOSA COUNTY – The Florida Department of Environmental Protection has authorized the US Coast Guard to burn oil offshore as part of the oil spill response. The Okaloosa County Health Department in coordination with county emergency management and local officials want the public to know that if it becomes necessary for responders to burn oil offshore, some particulate matter (PM) may reach the shore. PM is a mix of very small particles and liquid droplets found in the air. PM may not reach the shore if the fires are far enough away. When burning the oil, responders carefully monitor the weather, wind, and water conditions and stop the burn right away if there is any problem.

The Environmental Protection Agency is currently monitoring air quality in the region, and continues to coordinate with local and state officials to provide the most up-to-date information for public health protection.

People near Florida's Gulf Coast may smell the oil spill odor from onshore, which is similar to what you can smell at a gas station. The smell comes from "Volatile Organic Compounds" (VOCs) in the oil. You can smell these VOCs at levels well below those that would make you sick. Exposure to low levels of VOCs may cause irritation of the eyes, nose, throat, and skin. It is possible that people with asthma may be more sensitive to the effects of inhaled VOCs.

Individuals can follow these tips to avoid negative health affects from the particulate matter:

- Staying indoors in air-conditioning and avoiding strenuous outdoor activity.
- If symptoms do not improve, contact a physician or other health care professional for medical advice.
- Individuals who have pre-existing medical conditions such as asthma or other respiratory illnesses should contact their physician if feeling symptomatic.

For more information:

- Okaloosa County Health Department: (850) 833-9247 or www.HealthyOkaloosa.com
- Okaloosa County: www.okaloosaf1.com
- Okaloosa County Citizen's Information Line: Dial 311 – Option 8
- Florida Oil Spill Information Line: (888) 337-3569
- Florida Poison Information Centers: (800) 222-1222
- Air Quality Monitoring Information: www.dep.state.fl.us/deepwaterhorizon/health.htm

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