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U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

August 31, 2012

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The Honorable Jane Lubchenco
Administrator
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
U. S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Administrator Lubchenco:

As Hurricane Isaac barreled into the Gulf of Mexico with 100 mile-per-hour winds, it was estimated that as much as 1 million barrels of oil buried in the Gulf of Mexico sediment since the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster would be stirred up and mixed into the waters of the Gulf¹. As emergency responders deal with the impacts of this storm on land, I am writing to understand the plans the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has to deal with the impacts the BP oil will have on the beaches and marshlands.

More than two years have passed since the explosion aboard the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig caused a massive blowout from the BP Macondo well. It took 87 days until the well was capped and oil flow halted. During the spill an unprecedented amount of oil was released into the Gulf of Mexico, making it the largest marine oil spill in U.S. history. Estimates place the volume of oil released at nearly 5 million barrels. As part of the efforts to mitigate the impacts of this catastrophic oil spill, millions of gallons of chemical dispersant were added to the Gulf waters, contributing to a stew of chemicals, oil and gas with impacts that are still not fully understood. Although smaller storms have hit the Gulf over the last 2 years, Isaac was the first hurricane to hit the area since this worst oil spill in U.S. history. According to the U.S. National Hurricane Center, the storm reached winds of as high as 80 miles-per-hour with a storm surge of 12 feet as it hit land.

As the storm passed, any oil carried by the winds and storm surge could be pushed deeper into the marshlands and potentially back onto land, re-igniting the potential for this oil to impact the plants and animals that thrive in the swamps and marshes. Furthermore, oil that has settled into the sediment in swallower areas of the Gulf

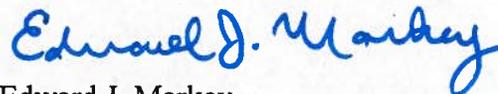
¹ <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-08-28/louisiana-plans-for-gulf-oil-dredged-by-isaac-s-force>

may have been churned up to the surface. In light of these environmental concerns, I am writing to determine what steps NOAA will take to deal with these potential risks. Therefore, I respectfully, ask that you respond to the following questions by close of business on September 14, 2012:

1. What is NOAA's experience dealing with past storm activity in the Gulf of Mexico? Have past smaller storms caused oil to resurface? If so, can you please describe any environmental impacts it may have had, and how NOAA responded and/or remediated any such damages?
2. Since the BP oil spill, has NOAA conducted any computer modeling to understand how the oil in sediment would move and impact marshes and beaches in the event of a storm?
3. What interaction does the NOAA have with other federal agencies in addressing the potential environmental risk from oil that may be churned up during a strong storm?
4. What tools does the NOAA employ in dealing with weathered oil that resurfaces during a storm? Does the NOAA view this as another opportunity to remove and remediate oil that would otherwise be inaccessible in the sediment?

Thank you for your assistance and cooperation in responding to this request. Should you have any questions, please have your staff contact Dr. Avenel Joseph of the Natural Resources Committee Democratic staff at 202-225-2836.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
Ranking Member
Natural Resources Committee