

BP (Ethics Case discussed in IPRO Ethics Bowl Demonstration Video)

A week after the British Petroleum oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, you are hired by BP to act as a consultant on the cleanup of a section of the Louisiana coastline. At an early meeting of the expert advising committee, one of your colleagues, Dr. Sanderson, suggests that dispersants can be used to help break up the dense oil that is continuing to accumulate on the surface of the ocean and making its way towards the shore. He suggests using the product line Corexit, as BP already has a relationship with the manufacturer of this family of dispersants and can get a large amount for a reasonable price. He further urges adopting this line of action as a large amount of the chemical has already been shipped to other parts of Louisiana, so it is readily on hand. At the end of the meeting, all the committee members agree that rapid action is needed, as the oil is quickly moving closer to the shoreline.

That evening, you talk about this situation with a friend of yours, an environmental scientist who expressed interest in your work on the oil spill. When she hears that your committee is thinking about recommending Corexit, she warns you that the product line is no longer approved for use in Britain because laboratory tests found the dispersant harmful to sea life that inhabits rocky shores. The next day you do some research and talk to a representative from Nalco Corporation, the manufacturer of Corexit who tells you that these findings likely have no relevance in the current situation, as in Louisiana the dispersant will be used in the open sea, not on the shore. However, you are worried about the sheer amount of the dispersant that is going to be used, and that some of it might get to the shoreline. The representative tells you that this should not be a problem and directs you to the safety information sheets on Corexit available off of the Nalco web site. When reading these sheets, you find out that a number of the ingredients in the dispersant are labeled as “proprietary”. In an answer to an email you send, the Nalco representative tells you that some ingredients are listed as proprietary to protect the company’s trade secrets.

The next day, you communicate all of this information to your fellow committee members by email, knowing that you have a second meeting scheduled in two days time. At this meeting, the expert committee is going to have to decide on what recommendation to make.

Question: What recommendation should the committee make, and why? Be sure to justify your answer.

Case based on facts drawn from New York Times Article, “In Gulf of Mexico, Chemicals Under Scrutiny.” May 5, 2010. Elisabeth Rosenthal. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/06/science/earth/06dispersants.html>

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