

Pipes, not sand, seen as best way to block oil

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Published: Tuesday, June 8, 2010 at 11:33 a.m.

HOUMA — Terrebonne Parish officials are backing a home-grown invention designed to block oil from local marshes.

It involves building a barricade made of floating pipes that would be anchored between barrier islands off Terrebonne's coast.

The Terrebonne Parish Council unanimously agreed Monday to support the so-called Rigid Pipe Boom plan, devised by local businessman Chet Morrison and engineering-firm president Kenny Smith. The council is asking BP for the \$100 million it would cost to build it.

Specially fabricated 30-inch pipes would be anchored to piles driven in island passes from Raccoon Island to Port Fourchon. The men likened the pipes, which are being created and tested at Morrison's facilities, to the pontoons under a house boat.

The booms would be sturdier than the flexible ones currently used, Smith and Morrison said.

"The flexible boom is just not working," said Morrison, chairman of Chet Morrison Contractors. They break loose in rough seas, allowing oil-contaminated water into sensitive and vulnerable coastal marshes. Conventional boom is best suited for inshore waters where wave action is less likely to allow oily water to splash over or around the barriers, he said.

The two men said they submitted their idea to BP and the federal government but they wanted Terrebonne government's support to give it additional validity and weight. They said similar products are already being used in Alabama and Florida.

The parish plans to submit the rigid-boom idea to BP as a Terrebonne project, said Parish President Michel Claudet.

He said the idea is among several his office has fielded in recent weeks.

"This is one that made sense," Claudet said.

Sand berms are being built along the barrier islands off parts of the Louisiana coast to keep encroaching oil out of inland marshes and bays. That work will cost an estimated \$360 million to be paid by BP.

The work won't be done off Terrebonne's coast, officials have said, because the passes are too deep and the berms would require too much maintenance.

Other methods to narrow passes, such as barges and rocks, were considered but would cost too much or take too long, Smith said.

Barges can be quickly moved into place, but could prove a liability if they break loose during a storm. Rocks are porous and would absorb oil.

Morrison and Smith's booms would rise and fall with tides and require little maintenance, they said.

Underwater skirts can be attached and absorbent booms could be added for an extra layer of protection, Morrison said.

The pipes would have one opening to allow boat traffic through.

The boom would be placed in a V-shape to funnel oil to that opening, where a skimmer would be positioned to collect the oil.

No scientific tests have been done on the pipe-boom plans, and Councilman Johnny Pizzolatto questioned whether the pipes would roll and allow oil past. Counterweights could help keep that from happening, Morrison said.

If a hurricane comes, the pipes could be flooded with water and pushed to the ocean floor so they don't pose a threat, the men said.

Morrison and Smith said 10 miles can be laid in less than three weeks. They ultimately hope to cover 24 miles of passes and 26 miles of islands. Pipe booms in passes would cost an estimated \$36 million to \$40 million, they said.

But the council decided to ask BP for protection along the entire island chain. The pipe-booms could supplement other protection measures, such as putting additional sand on barrier islands, council members said.

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