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A Short Cut To Soak Up Oil Spill

One day, a client went into a hair salon with flowing locks, the next, her tresses were being stuffed in women's nylons and on their way to help soak up the oil that has begun to wash ashore on the US Gulf coast. People from around the world have been giving the hair off their heads, the fur off their pets' backs, and the tights off their legs to make booms and mats to mop up the oily mess spewing out of the sunken BP-leased Deepwater Horizon oil platform which is lying on the seabed of the Gulf of Mexico.

"People from France, England, Spain, Brazil, Australia, all over Canada and the United States have signed up," said Lisa Gautier, cofounder of the Matter of Trust charity, which links up recycled goods - like hair - with causes that need them, and is coordinating the collection of hair, fur and tights for the oil slick. "There are 370,000 hair salons sending hair, 100,000 pet groomers, alpaca and sheep farmers, and the other day we had a huge group of transvestites, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, who donated their very long nylons," Gautier added. US nationwide pet supplies chain Petco has also joined the effort, as oil began to wash ashore on Louisiana's beaches. "We have nearly 1,000 grooming salons across the country and think we can ship up to a tonne of fur a day. We can make a real difference with this," Petco spokeswoman Brooke Simon said. Matter of Trust is getting some 204,000kg of hair or fur coming in every day and 50 individuals or companies signing up every minute. "All the countries that do not have a natural fibre recycling system are looking at this and responding. Our phones are blowing out," Gautier went on to add.



At the Michael Angelo Hair Studio in Tampa, on the Florida Gulf coast to the east of the oil slick, staff are sweeping up all the hair clippings that fall on the floor each day, boxing them up and sending them to one of 15 warehouses where the hair will be made into absorbent booms or mats to sop up the oil.

Volunteers take the hair and stuff it into nylon stockings - queen size are best because "they have kind of big thighs and you can put more hair in there", said Gautier which are tied together and covered in plastic mesh netting to make an absorbent boom to soak up the oil. The US Army Corps of Engineers moved hair-based boom production up a notch this week when it worked out a way to make a mile of boom a day with the hair and fur, Gautier said. These are not the same as the large booms that are being laid in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Those aim to contain the oil as it heads towards the coast and the fragile wetlands of the Mississippi Delta, whereas the hair- and fur-filled booms will be laid on beaches, where they will soak up any oil that washes ashore. It's believed the idea of using hair to soak up oil came from a hairdresser in Alabama, Phil McCrory, who had an "aha" moment after seeing Alaskan sea otters saturated with oil after the Exxon Valdez spill in 1998.

"I was thinking, well, if the otter was getting saturated with oil, then the hair that I sweep up should do the same thing," McCrory has said. He swept up hair from his salon floor, took it home, "put it in my wife's pantyhose" and then used it to sop up a spill he made in his pool. "Within a minute and a half, I had the water crystal clear, and all the oil was in the pantyhose loaded with hair," he said. But bid to cap slick is slipping away Engineers are mulling over options after the first try to cap a ruptured pipe gushing oil in to the Gulf of Mexico failed when ice crystals clogged a containment dome. Officials said they have not yet given up hope of capping the leaks, some 5,000ft below the surface, which are haemorrhaging up to 210,000 barrels a day. But they cautioned it will likely be several days before a solution is found. "I wouldn't say it's failed yet," said Doug Suttles, chief operating officer for British energy giant BP, which is responsible for the clean-up. "What we attempted to do last night didn't work because these hydrates plugged up the top of the dome." Clearing out the slushy crystals is easy - the 90-tonne chamber just has to be raised to warmer levels, Suttles said. Keeping the crystals out so that a pipe can be lowered into the dome to suck the oil to a waiting barge is another matter.

BP is also considering other temporary measures such as trying to plug the leaks by injecting ground-up material in a "junk shot", but Suttles said BP cannot proceed until it is sure that it "won't make the situation worse". The BP official said his company had anticipated encountering hydrates, but had not expected them to be as significant a problem. The dome had been expected to be operational today and to collect about 85 per cent of the leaking crude by funnelling it up to a barge on the surface. An estimated 13 million litres of oil has formed a slick the size of a small country.