UA professor to aid in Lebanon oil spill

RICK STEINER: He sees a similarity to problems posed by the Selendang Ayu.

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A University of Alaska professor is headed for the Middle East today to help the government of Lebanon respond to a major fuel spill caused by Israeli bombing of a power plant last month.

Rick Steiner, a conservation specialist with the university's Marine Advisory Program, said Lebanon's Ministry of the Environment and other regional organizations asked him to assist. He will fly first to Amman, Jordan, and then to Beirut on a Jordanian relief flight.

The mid-July airstrike on the power plant at Jiyeh, about 20 miles south of Beirut, ruptured large fuel tanks and caused a spill estimated to be between 3 million and 4.5 million gallons, according to various news organizations. The oil reached the Mediterranean and drifted north, coating beaches along Lebanon and reaching waters off Syria. It may continue on and threaten...
Turkey.

The ongoing conflict in the region between Israel and Hezbollah has prevented attempts to contain or recover the oil.

Satellite images he's seen suggest the spill could affect 100 miles of shoreline, or more, Steiner said. He's been told the goop is a foot deep on some beaches.

The fuel is similar to that spilled in the waters off Unalaska by the Selendang Ayu in December 2004, he said.

"It could still be pumped if we could get some pumps in," he said.

"The big problem is, we can't get any response into the area until hostilities subside," he added. "That could be any day now, or weeks from now. There's a lot of labor there, people willing to get out on the beaches (and clean up) ... but there's still the huge security risk."

The oiled beaches are nesting areas for green sea turtles, an endangered species, according to an online National Geographic news service, which also reported that Lebanese environmental groups say the spill threatens commercially important bluefin tuna spawning areas.

The United Nations Environment Programme and regional organizations are trying to mount a response and get experts and cleanup crews to the area, but those efforts are just now getting under way after weeks of delay caused by the conflict.

The university is not paying for his travel or his salary on the mission to Lebanon, said Steiner, who also served as chief technical adviser to Pakistan's minister of environment during a tanker spill there in 2003-2004.

The Exxon Valdez spill is estimated at 11 million gallons. The Selendang Ayu lost about 335,000
gallons of fuel when it drifted aground and broke up off Unalaska Island.

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