

NATIONAL NEWS

Tanker fire put out; bacteria sprayed on oil

From Herald Wire Services

GALVESTON, Texas — Firefighters on Friday extinguished the blaze aboard the Norwegian tanker Mega Borg and stopped its oil leak, nearly a week after an explosion damaged the vessel in the Gulf of Mexico.

Minutes later scientists sprayed natural oil-eating bacteria across a 40-acre patch of floating oil in the first open-sea test of a novel method for controlling oil pollution.

The two events ended one of the country's worst shipping accidents and may have opened a new era in overcoming toxic pollution.

Meanwhile, the Coast Guard boosted its estimate of the amount of oil released into the Gulf of Mexico to 4.3 million gallons, making it the nation's fifth largest spill.

Officials would not elaborate on how they reached the new estimate. The spill earlier had been estimated at 3 million gallons.

An explosion rocked the 885-foot supertanker, Mega Borg, late June 8, hours after it began transferring its cargo of light Angolan crude to a smaller ship.

Observers said Friday no flames or smoke could be seen coming from the tanker, but the Coast Guard said firefighters continued to stand by in case the still-hot ship reignited.

"There are no flames, but it's still really hot. If we walk away from it, it will go right back up [in flames]," Coast Guard spokesman Todd Nelson said.

In the experimental use of the microbes, officials working on a Coast Guard boat mixed the sandlike bacteria with sea water and sprayed it on a section of the 30-mile-long slick.

The process, known as bioreme-

WORST U.S. SPILLS

March 24, 1989: Exxon Valdez, Prince William Sound, Alaska, 10.92 million gallons.

Nov. 1, 1979: Burmah Agate tanker, Galveston Bay, Texas, up to 10.7 million gallons burned or spilled.

Dec. 15, 1976: Argo Merchant tanker, Massachusetts-southeastern coast, 7.6 million gallons.

Nov. 6, 1985: exploratory well, Ranger, Texas, 6.3 million gallons.

June 8, 1990: Norwegian supertanker Mega Borg, Gulf of Mexico off Galveston, 4.3 million gallons.

Jan. 2, 1988: Ashland Oil Co., above-ground storage tank, Jefferson Borough, Pa., 3.8 million gallons.

July 30, 1984: Alvenus tanker, Cameron, La., 2.8 million gallons.

Oct. 31, 1984: Puerto Rican tanker, San Francisco, 2 million gallons.

Aug. 18, 1984: Triangle Oil Corp., above-ground storage tank, Jacksonville, Fla., 2.5 million gallons burned.

Nov. 22, 1980: Georgia tanker, Pilottown, La., 1.3 million gallons.

diation, has never been tried on an oil spill in open seas, although lab experiments have been successful, said Texas Land Commissioner Garry Mauro.

The bacteria eat the oil and reduce it to a fatty substance that fish can eat. When the oil runs out, the microbes die.