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Oil Blocker

By Rochelle Broder-Singer - 9/1/2010

Donnie Brown (left) and Craig Barker by a demonstration air curtain tank.

[Photo:
Ray Stanyard]

Can a 1,270-foot pneumatic air curtain be instrumental in preventing oil from spreading into harbors and bays? Destin's Donnie Brown and Craig Barker, who developed the curtain, certainly think so.

Here's how the curtain works: 12 giant compressors will pump air through a pipe suspended in the water. The bubbles they create should force underwater oil to the surface, where skimmers can collect it.

Brown, a product development engineer and owner of PumpOut USA, had been working for five years on a similar application to contain fuel or oil spills in marinas. When the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded, he thought he might be able to modify his work to help contain the spill in the challenging high-wind, high-wave Gulf. He called on his friend Barker, a former mayor of Destin and a product development engineer, to help him. The pair estimate they have been through almost 50 prototyping phases already and have partnered with a large marine company to install the curtain. They estimate it will cost \$200,000 to install and another \$500,000 a month to operate.

Development proceeded at a rapid pace because similar devices had been used in other countries to control spills. "We took the existing base, and we expanded upon it and simply overcame challenges as they were presented," Barker says.

Inventors: **Donnie Brown, Craig Barker** (a third partner, Lee Ingram, was involved in the early stages but is now in a dispute with Brown and Barker over his involvement with the project.)

Product: Pneumatic Air Curtain

What it does: Forces underwater oil to the surface, where skimmers can collect it

Market: Marinas, coastal regions affected by oil spills

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