

Skimming for oil

A membrane that separates oil from water promises a faster oil-spill cleanup

At a California trade show, Stephen Neal stretched his legs behind the Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center and came across a frogman cutting algae.

“It looked like floating dinosaur diarrhea,” says Neal, the chief executive officer of Canadian Floating Fence Corp. “When he got out of the quagmire, it turned out he was from Calgary.”

The two men hit it off and a moment later, Neal and his brother, both in business suits, were working their 50-foot floating fence over the water, demonstrating its versatility in cleaning up pretty much any kind of waterborne mess, from oil to dead algae.

“We rounded up 6,000 pounds of the stuff, a third of the lagoon, in an hour and a half,” Neal says.

It was the late 1980s when Neal’s father came up with the idea of using membranes to separate contaminants from water. By blocking larger molecules, such as hydrocarbon molecules, and allowing the smaller water molecules through, he tailored an oil-spill solution and made one-off sales to Dubai, Turkey and the U.S. Coast Guard for the Exxon Valdez spill in 1989. The venture was more hobby than business until the 2010 BP plc Gulf of Mexico spill when he called his sons and urged them to re-patent the XBoom product and take it on the road.

“The industry doesn’t really have a way to filter oil directly off of water. Traditional booming skips across the water at three-quarters a knot per hour,” Neal says. “Our boom’s performance is up to three knots per hour without any failures.”

The company has since tested XBoom at SAIT Polytechnic. It has attended numerous trade shows and was sponsored by Alberta Innovates – Technology Futures to demonstrate its floating fence in Finland.

“We’re also looking at doing remediation,” Neal says. ■



Canadian Floating Fence has taken the concept of the floating boom to another level, offering a product ideally suited to capturing and retaining a wide variety of floating messes.