

How to Soak Up Oil



Did you know that chicken feathers have many uses? Of course, they keep chickens warm and dry. They can also be used to make fluffy pillows, cozy blankets, and toasty winter coats. Now a new use has been found for these feathers—sponging up oily spills.

Giant ships called *tankers* bring oil to the United States from other countries. These tankers travel great distances over rough seas. Sometimes a hole forms on the bottom of a tanker. When this happens, oil can leak or spill onto the water. The oil kills birds, sea animals, and plants.

In the past, special boats were brought in to clean up the oil from the sea. The boats used a machine to suck the oil out of the water. Cleaning up this way cost a lot of money, and wasn't always successful. As it turns out, chicken feathers are a better, easier, and less expensive way to clean up oil spills.



Chicken feathers were tested at an oil spill on the Mississippi River. This spill took place about 20 miles from the city of New Orleans. The oil had spread until it covered a 14-mile area. It had turned the riverbanks black. Volunteers threw 100 lumpy white pillows from small boats. These feather-stuffed pillows worked like magic.

Almost at once, the pillows soaked up the oily water. When they were pulled from the river, clear water began to drain from the pillows. The feathers in each pillow had soaked up about 8 pounds of thick, black oil. Those 100 pillows soaked up about 800 pounds of oil in all. The chicken feathers did their job well.

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In many ways, chicken feathers are the perfect tools for cleaning up oil spills. They are inexpensive and easy to buy. Farms in many countries produce millions of pounds of chicken each year. Since the feathers cannot be eaten, chicken farms need to get rid of loads of feathers.

Unlike the special clean-up boats, the pillows can be used in rough seas. This means that people do not have to risk their lives cleaning oil in a storm. The pillows are simply strung together and dropped over pools of oil. After the oil has been soaked up, the pillows are easy to pick up with long poles or nets. Feather pillows are light and easy to carry to spill sites. Afterwards, they can be buried or burned without causing dangerous smoke.

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The idea of using chicken feathers to soak up oil did not come from scientists in a lab. The idea came about by accident. Once, while walking along the seashore, a man came upon a group of dead birds. He saw that their feathers had been coated with oil. The oil had made the feathers heavy. Because of that, the birds were no longer able to fly. The man realized that the feathers were heavy because they had soaked up the oil from an oil spill. An idea was born that both helped the environment and saved companies a lot of money.

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