

A Little Trim Goes A Long Way Salon Sends Hair To Aid In Oil Cleanups



When customers have their hair cut at Brittany Molina's Jacksonville salon, they help a campaign dedicated to rapidly cleaning up future oil spills.

They don't donate money. Instead, they donate hair. For the past three months, Molina and her employees at Brittany's Spa Salon, on Argyle Forest Boulevard, have boxed up hair clippings and sent them off to Matter of Trust, a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that uses them to make half-inch thick, carpet-like mats that soak up oil.

"Once a month, we send a real big box," Molina said. "When we get two tall kitchen bags full of hair, that's when we send it in." Molina said her customers respond well to posters in her salon advertising the effort. "They usually say, 'That's really neat,'" she said. "They ask us why we do it, and we tell them it's to make a difference."

Matter of Trust receives hair from 182 Florida salons, but Molina's is the only one in Jacksonville, Matter of Trust President Lisa Gautier said via e-mail. Matter of Trust sorts hair, coordinates the manufacture of mats for storage and donates them to clean up spills. The mats were put to the test in November, when the container ship Cosco Busan dumped fuel oil into San Francisco Bay. San Francisco Water Department Superintendent Lance Contreras oversaw volunteer cleanup efforts. "I got some reports that they [the mats] worked well," he said.

Matter of Trust is not the primary maker of the mats. Former hair stylist Phil McCrory patented the use of human hair as a way to clean up oil. Today, he works for World Response Group, a Florida City company that sells hair mats to oil cleanup companies. McCrory said the idea came in 1989 as he watched television coverage of the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska. He gathered several days worth of hair clippings and stuffed them into an old pair of nylons. He dumped a gallon of used motor oil into a water-filled plastic swimming pool and then tossed in the nylon and hair bundle. "It got the oil up in two minutes," he said. "The water was crystal-clear." That discovery led to the OttoMat, named after televised images of oil-soaked otters after the historic spill.

World Response Group's mats are produced in China using leftover hair from Chinese wig factories and from India. Both the OttoMats and Matter of Trust's mats are donated to help in oil spill emergencies, but the OttoMats are sold at other times also. Four days before the Cosco Busan spill, about 500 gallons of oil spilled into the St. Johns River in a fueling accident. Contractor Jacksonville Pollution Control used plastic brooms and pads to clean up the spill, Manager Don Lewis said. Lewis said he hasn't heard of hair as an oil cleanup tool.

"Over 30 years, we've thrown a lot of stuff at oil spills," he said. "But human hair? That is a new one for me."