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DRI to hold Gulf oil spill seminar

By John Flynn Rooney
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Chicago-based DRI – The Voice of the Defense Bar’s upcoming seminar about the Gulf of Mexico oil spill litigation will include plaintiff and defense lawyers and oil industry representatives, organizers said.

The program, called “Oil Spill Litigation and Emerging Issues Seminar,” will be co-chaired by H. Patrick Morris, a shareholder with Johnson & Bell Ltd. and Robert P. Scott Jr., a partner with Abrams, Scott & Bickley LLP in Houston.



H. Patrick Morris

The Deepwater Horizon rig, leased by BP, exploded on April 20 and killed 11 workers. A federal task force said about 172 million gallons of oil made it into the Gulf between April and mid-July, when a temporary cap bottled up the oil.

The idea for the program came from Henry M. Sneath, a Pittsburgh lawyer and DRI’s first vice president. DRI is a national organization of defense trial lawyers and corporate counsel.

Plaintiff lawyers began filing lawsuits shortly after the spill, and DRI knew there would be litigation involving not only its members but also other defense and com-

mercial lawyers, Sneath said.

“So, we thought we could do an educational program that would really look at this spill from both sides,” Sneath said. “We’re presenting a program with both a plaintiff and defense perspective.”

W. Mark Lanier, a Houston lawyer, will present the “Strategy from the Plaintiff’s Perspective” session.

The “Criminal Exposures” session will be presented by William A. Coates, a Greenville, S.C., lawyer.

Morris said he will moderate a discussion about “What Are the Human Health Effects of Crude Oil, Dispersants and the Other Chemicals in the Gulf?”

Rusty Hardin, a Houston lawyer who represented the accounting firm of Arthur Andersen in civil lawsuits in the wake of of Enron Corp.’s implosion, will discuss “Internal Investigations, Company Audits and State Oil Rig Inspections.”

Rawle O. King, an insurance analyst with the Congressional Research Service in Washington, D.C., will present the “Future Insurability: The Offshore Energy Insurance Market” session.

Congress is considering massively increasing insurance coverage for any entity who wants to do business in the Gulf, Morris said.

“The requirements for insurance coverage are going to be through the roof,” said Morris, who co-chairs Johnson & Bell’s

toxic tort group.

John Hofmeister, the former president of Shell Oil and author of the new book, “Why We Hate the Oil Companies: Straight Talk from an Energy Insider,” will speak about energy independence.

The seminar will be Aug. 12-13 at The Houstonian Hotel in Houston.

Sneath said organizers hope to attract between 125 and 150 people from throughout the nation to attend the seminar.

David F. Fanning, another Johnson & Bell shareholder, estimated that more than 300 lawsuits have been filed resulting from the Gulf oil spill in 12 states, including Alabama, Florida, Mississippi and Texas.

In May, BP filed a motion to have the cases handled by one federal multidistrict litigation court.

The Judicial Panel for Multidistrict Litigation held a hearing about the oil spill cases late last week in Boise, Idaho.

Plaintiff lawyers generally favored that the cases be handled in Louisiana, specifically the district court in New Orleans, Fanning said. Attorneys for the defendants, including BP, said they prefer for the cases to be handled by the federal district court in Houston, he said.

The judicial panel is expected to decide which court will handle the cases later this month, Fanning said.

Associated Press contributed to this article.