

Gulf oil spill threatens economic, environmental catastrophe

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Oil is leaking into the Gulf of Mexico from the well beneath where a British Petroleum (BP) drilling rig exploded at the rate of 5,000 barrels a day, a rate five times greater than earlier estimates, the US government reported late Wednesday night. US Coast Guard officials said a scientist from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration had reached the conclusion based on aerial surveys of the slick.

The spill, which is expected to hit land Friday near the mouth of the Mississippi River, threatens an ecological and economic disaster, imperiling beaches, estuaries, marshlands and wildlife. Gulf Coast fishing and tourism industries could be crippled.

Eleven workers died and four more were critically injured in the April 20 explosion on the oil rig operated by BP contractor Deepwater Horizon as it neared completion of drilling. A blowout caused by cementing operations was the likely cause.

At the current rate of leakage, some 210,000 gallons daily, the Gulf oil spill will exceed the volume of the Exxon Valdez disaster by the third week of June. By some time next week the spill will likely surpass the magnitude of the 1969 oil spill in the Santa Barbara Channel off the coast of California. That disaster led to the moratorium on offshore oil and gas drilling along wide portions of the US coast that President Obama now wants lifted.

Efforts to cap the leak, at a depth of 5,000 feet, have so far failed. Proposed solutions, such as drilling an offset well to relieve pressure or dropping a dome over the leak at the seafloor, are untested and could take weeks or months to implement.

A large-scale mobilization is now under way to try to contain the spill, but major damage appears inevitable.

After the Coast Guard issued its report BP tried to downplay the extent of the spill, defending its earlier gross underestimate of the leakage. Now BP admits that it has discovered a new leak close to the wellhead. Earlier reports indicated two leaks in the riser, the pipe connecting the rig to the wellhead, which collapsed following the explosion and now lies on the seabed.

Biologists have warned of the potentially devastating impact of the oil spill. "If this thing gets to the coast, to those sugar-white beaches from Gulf Shores, Alabama to Panama City, Florida that would just be a horrible disaster," said Robert Ship, chairman of the Marine Sciences Department at the University of South Alabama.

Shrimp fishermen have already filed suit against BP, saying oil contamination threatens their livelihoods. "If the oil reaches shore it will kill all the shrimp, all the crabs, all the oysters," warned the owner of a Louisiana shrimp distributor. Seafood is a \$1.8 billion industry in the state.

The slick threatens shipping on the Mississippi, a vital artery for grain and oil and the nation's largest port in terms of tonnage. Gary LaGrange, president and chief executive officer of the Port of New Orleans, warned that "if oil were to come and block the entrance of the port, you cannot run ships through it. In that case the port would be essentially shut down."

According to a report in the *Wall Street Journal*, the

Deepwater Horizon oil rig lacked a device called an acoustic switch that could have shut off the flow of oil. The remote controlled device sends acoustic impulses through the water that can trigger an underwater valve to shut down the well.

All offshore rigs have one main switch to shut off the flow of oil by closing a valve located on the ocean floor. There is also supposed to be a backup, a so-called “dead man,” that will shut down the well in the event of a catastrophe on the rig. Apparently neither of these devices worked on the Deepwater Horizon rig. The crewmembers who would have been closest to the shutoff switch are among those missing and presumed dead.

With an acoustic trigger a crew can shut down a well even if the rig is damaged or evacuated. However, BP, which reported profits of \$5.598 billion for the first quarter of 2010, vigorously resisted changes to US regulations that would have required acoustic triggers on deep sea rigs, citing effectiveness and costs, about \$500,000 per unit. Compliant US regulators agreed, saying other backup plans were sufficient. They called the acoustic triggers unreliable and prone to causing unnecessary shutdowns.

However, according to a spokesman for Norway’s Petroleum Safety Authority quoted by the *Journal*, acoustic triggers are “the most successful and effective option.” Norway has used acoustic triggers on almost all its oil rigs since 1993.

The response of the Obama administration to the disaster is indicative of its prostration before the powerful corporate and financial interests it serves.

Following the oil rig explosion the Obama administration remained silent and indifferent, not even offering condolences to the families of the 11 workers who died. The White House continued its silence as the scale of the disaster widened, continuing its calls for expanded offshore drilling.

Only when the extent of the catastrophe became fully evident did Obama make a perfunctory statement. Downplaying the significance of the unfolding

environmental catastrophe, he merely called the oil spill an “incident.” Inevitably, he assigned the US military a prominent role in the response, even calling for the deployment of (Special Weapons and Tactics) SWAT teams to inspect oil rigs. However, the White House has held firm on its plans for opening US coastal waters to oil drilling.

Meanwhile, Obama appealed for advice from major oil company CEOs on how to minimize environmental damage from the spill. These are the very individuals that have relentlessly lobbied against safety and environmental regulations.

The role of the so-called liberal media as apologists for Obama and big oil also deserves note. In an editorial published April 29 the *New York Times* laments the fact that the impending environmental disaster in the Gulf of Mexico has “emboldened” opponents of Obama’s plan for offshore drilling. Calling the oil spill a “freak occurrence,” the *Times* editors urged the Obama administration to take swift measures to minimize the political damage so that nothing will impede the oil companies’ drive to tap the lucrative offshore fields.

The Obama administration claims BP will be responsible for the full cost of the cleanup. However, given the enormous power exerted by big oil over Washington, this is unlikely. In the case of the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska, up to that point the worst environmental disaster in US history, the oil giant successfully appealed damage awards to the Supreme Court. Ultimately it was ruled liable for the derisory sum of \$507 million, equivalent to a few days’ profit for Exxon. As for the clean-up costs, the company recovered a significant portion through insurance claims.



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