

Gulf oil spill compounded by BP's control of "cleanup"

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The Obama administration's decision to leave BP in control of its Deepwater Horizon spill site and in charge of cleanup efforts has seriously compounded the original disaster, testimony from workers, experts, and recent press accounts reveal.

Since the April 20 explosion that killed 11 workers 42 miles off the coast of Louisiana, BP has commanded all cleanup efforts and exercised total control over the spill site, blocking critical information from the public. The Obama administration, which exempted BP from producing environmental impact studies and oil spill contingency plans for its Gulf drilling operations, has no organized approach for addressing the spill, which is growing at a conservatively-estimated rate of 220,000 gallons per day.

Leaving BP to monitor its own cleanup activities is in keeping with Washington's steady deregulation of industry and finance in the US over the past three decades. The same "free market" nostrums that led to the Deepwater Horizon disaster are now providing the operating principle behind the cleanup. This approach has greatly exacerbated the disaster.

The spill has continued to spread on the surface, but the damage below may be more severe. Four-inch diameter tar balls have reached the shores of eastern Alabama, just miles from the Florida border. Six dead dolphins were found washed ashore in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, and more dead turtles, fish, and soiled birds have been found.

Because of BP's "proprietary" control of the drilling site 40 miles off Louisiana's coast, it is impossible to even estimate the size of the spill. BP refused to make available underwater footage of the oil spill as the heavy crude spewed out near the ocean floor, according to ABC News.

BP has around-the-clock footage of the ruptured piping, film that could prove critical "in making independent assessments of the scope of the spill," Eric Smith, a professor at the Energy Institute of Tulane University told ABC. But the video footage might well reveal that far more is being spilled than the official estimate of 5,000 barrels per day, a fact which "could do public relations damage to BP," ABC concludes. Finally on Wednesday afternoon, BP released brief video footage of one of the leaks on YouTube.

At a May 11 news briefing, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs was asked whether anyone in the administration had access to BP's underwater footage and why it had not been made available to the public. Gibbs indicated that no one in the administration had viewed it outside of the "Unified Command Center" in Louisiana. That response brought the following revealing exchange:

Reporter: But if the White House is in charge, if the federal government is in charge of all of this, couldn't they force BP's hand to make that

video available?

Gibbs: Well, we've asked that to happen.

Reporter: Well, why hasn't it happened?

Gibbs: You'd have to ask that of BP.

Later in the same press conference, a reporter asked Gibbs whether or not there was any federal agency "working on figuring out alternative plans to plug the hole?"

Gibbs responded with a joke. "There's not somewhere on a dock in Annapolis a secret submarine that will fix this leak," he quipped, before adding that Obama "has asked that everything in our power be done."

What Gibbs intended to be humorous is in fact highly revealing. There is not a single submarine equipped to handle an underwater oil spill, even though the federal government makes available to the military trillions of dollars for every manner of high-tech killing machine, including an armada of nuclear submarines.

Gibbs concluded this line of questioning with a declaration of the administration's prostration before BP. "If we have problems with what they're [BP] doing, we have communicated and will continue to communicate to them things that have to be done," Gibbs said.

If Gibbs was unapologetic over BP's refusal to make public its video footage of the spill, it is perhaps because federal agencies under the Obama administration have also been withholding crucial information.

The Mineral Management Service (MMS), the federal agency tasked with overseeing the nation's offshore drilling industry, has also refused media requests that it release documents related to its inspections of the Deepwater Horizon. Soon after the explosion, the MMS declared that there were no violations found on the rig in a series of 26 government inspections.

CBS News reports that when it "asked to see those inspection reports on April 29th it took the agency a week and a half to decide that the public records could not be released because they were 'considered part of an ongoing investigation.'" An MMS spokesperson told CBS that the agency must first, "scrutinize these documents very carefully to ensure they meet legal standards for release." The MMS did not explain why, if the inspections revealed no violations, they would threaten an ongoing investigation or challenge "legal standards."

At House Energy Committee hearings held Wednesday with executives

from BP, Transocean, and Halliburton—the three corporations implicated in the disaster—the head of Transocean, Steven Newman, confirmed that one of the Deepwater Horizon’s shear ram drivers—used to slice piping in the event of a blowout—was modified in 2005 at the request of BP and with the approval of the MMS. It was modified for testing, but in the process was rendered useless for a real emergency.

The House committee found other problems with the rig’s blowout preventer, including “a significant leak in a key hydraulic system,” according to Rep. Bart Stupak (Democrat, Michigan). Moreover, its shear rams, even when functioning, are “not powerful enough to cut through joints in the drill pipe” and choke off a leak. Stupak also said that the battery to operate a “deadman” remote shutoff switch for the preventer may have had depleted power.

According to Rep. Henry Waxman (Democrat, California), head of the House Energy Committee, BP officials confirmed that, on the same day as the explosion, the Deepwater Horizon failed a critical pressure test. The test indicated high levels of gas in the rig’s well bore. BP claims it determined to proceed with removing mud in favor of much lighter sea water after positive results were produced by a later test, carried out two hours before the explosion.

The story has been backed up by extensive research gathered by Robert Bea, a University of California at Berkeley engineering professor. Bea found that in the weeks leading up to the disaster, the Deepwater Horizon had been hit by a series of major blasts of natural gas—one so dangerous that all mechanical devices on the rig were shut down for fear of igniting the plume.

“As the job unfolded, ... the workers did have intermittent trouble with pockets of natural gas,” one worker reported to Bea. “Highly flammable, the gas was forcing its way up the drill pipes. This was something BP had not foreseen as a serious problem, declaring a year earlier that gas was likely to pose only a ‘negligible’ risk. The government warned the company that gas buildup was a real concern and that BP should ‘exercise caution.’”

Another employee’s statement was even more chilling: “At one point during the previous several weeks, so much of it came belching up to the surface that a loudspeaker announcement called for a halt to all ‘hot work’, meaning any smoking, welding, cooking or any other use of fire. Smaller belches, or ‘kicks,’ had stalled work as the job was winding down” in the days before the accident. Bea said he could not name the people who gave the statements or reveal their positions.

“The same trail of tears led to Katrina,” Bea commented. “BP fell into the same damn trap, and they were not engineering; they were ‘imagineering.’ Risk analysis continues to mislead us because we’re only looking at part of the risk.” Bea has produced the most detailed recounting of the events leading up to the explosion.

All of these revelations make clear that BP had ample warning that an explosion was likely. Doubtless the corporation’s impetus to push forward with drilling was based in part on its lease of the rig from Transocean, which cost BP an estimated \$500,000 per day.

But these dangerous decisions could not have been made without the indifference of federal regulators.

Testimony given at Tuesday’s joint-MMS-Coast Guard hearings in Kenner, Louisiana, revealed that the MMS had completely abdicated its

task of regulating offshore rigs to the oil industry.

A regional supervisor for the MMS, Michael Saucier, confirmed that it carries out no inspections of blowout preventers, but limits itself to non-enforceable letters written to rig owners and operators. The American Petroleum Institute (API), an association of private concerns, sets standards for blowout preventers. But Saucier said he is not aware whether or not those standards are ever tested or enforced.

Coast Guard Captain Hung Nguyen, who headed the hearings, summed up the testimony. “So, MMS approves the design of the well, but they don’t check what type of pipe is used,” he said. “We have self-certification of critical equipment and safety notices that are not enforceable. There’s no licensing requirements for critical positions for drilling operations. The operator self-certifies, establishes what they think is adequate and then qualifies its own people to do the job.”

This is, in fact, an accurate assessment of the ethos of deregulation that has been advanced by both Republican and Democratic administrations since the 1970s.

The Louisiana hearings also produced new revelations that make clear the Obama administration’s early indifferent response to Deepwater Horizon compounded the disaster.

Under questioning at the joint MMS-Coast Guard hearing, a Coast Guard officer said that there was no coordinated response to the fire that burned for two days, eventually sinking the rig. It was this sinking that most likely ruptured piping near the ocean floor. As it went down, the Deepwater Horizon’s weight crumpled up the riser and drill bore connecting it to the oil well.

Nguyen asked the Coast Guard officer, Kevin Robb, about the firefighting response. “If firefighting efforts aren’t coordinated, and we’re putting water onto a vessel, couldn’t that contribute to the sinking of the vessel?” Nguyen asked. Robb said that was “exactly correct.”

Fishermen in Louisiana have also asked why boom was not used to encircle an area around the Deepwater Horizon soon after the explosion as a precaution against a spill. Instead, by the time BP began to deploy boom it could be used only to defend a relatively small coastal area.

In spite of the damning revelations, there is no indication that the oil spill has changed either the Obama administration’s policy toward offshore oil drilling or the industry’s practices. There are currently scores of offshore rigs in the Gulf of Mexico whose oil extraction is “regulated” by the MMS, and there are a handful that operate in waters deeper than the Deepwater Horizon.

All of these rigs are relying on blowout preventers that have not been tested by an impartial body. None of the rigs are required to operate with sound-activated trigger mechanisms for blowout preventers, as is required in Norway and Brazil. Like BP’s Deepwater Horizon, a large share have not been required to submit environmental impact studies and have based their oil spill contingency plans on best-case-scenario predictions.

Even since the Deepwater Horizon explosion the Obama administration continues to grant “categorical exclusions” to free up oil concerns from environmental impact studies—27 times in all.

MMS has “learned absolutely nothing from this national catastrophe,” said Kieran Suckling of the Center for Biological Diversity. “(It) is still

illegally exempting dangerous offshore drilling projects in the Gulf of Mexico from all environmental review. It is outrageous and unacceptable... It is inconceivable that MMS could look out its window at what is likely the worst oil spill in American history, then rubber stamp new BP drilling permits based on BP's patently false statements that an oil spill cannot occur and would not be dangerous if it did."



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