

BP disaster spreads oil pollution across the Gulf of Mexico

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On Tuesday new evidence emerged that the oil spill resulting from the explosion and sinking of the BP oil rig Deepwater Horizon nearly one month ago is far worse than it has been presented by BP and the Obama administration.

The appearance on Monday of tar balls similar to those already found in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama on the famed island of Key West, Florida, about 600 miles from the spill site, appeared to confirm scientists' fears that the oil spill caused by the April 20 explosion and subsequent collapse of the Deepwater Horizon rig has been picked up by fast-moving ocean waters known as the Gulf Loop.

The tar balls will be subjected to laboratory analysis to determine their origin. If they emerged from the Deepwater Horizon spill, it would indicate the oil from the spill is being taken by the Gulf Loop current and could pass into the Gulf Stream and around Florida to the Atlantic seaboard.

In the Keys and south Florida the spill threatens major coral reefs, beaches, and Everglades National Park. While scientists believe that the toxicity of the spill will break down with time and distance, the rate at which this will happen in the cold water and high pressure conditions of the deep sea—and at very high crude oil volumes—is unknown.

As late as Monday, officials from the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and Coast Guard publicly dismissed scientists who claimed the spill would be, or had already been, taken up by the Gulf Loop. On Monday, Rear Adm. Mary E. Landry of the Coast Guard, declared, "We know that the oil has not entered the loop current at this time." And NOAA administrator Jane Lubchenco said that oil entering the current is of little concern. "By the time the oil is in the loop current, it's likely to be very, very diluted," she said. "And so it's not likely to have a very significant impact. It sounds scarier than it is." NOAA also declared the documented evidence of dozens of massive oil plumes under the water's surface to be "totally untrue," without providing evidence to the contrary.

The comments from the Obama administration anticipated similar claims put forward by BP CEO Anthony Hayward. On Tuesday Hayward told Britain's SkyNews, "the environmental impact of this disaster is likely to have been very, very modest." This of a spill that has already released many millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.

The rosy statements put forth by BP and the Obama administration are, however, increasingly contradicted by scientific evidence—and oil working its way through a vast geographic expanse. "There is a very, very distinct trail of oil from the oil spill, all the way into this cyclone" that is pulling it into the Gulf Loop, oceanographer Nan Walker of Louisiana State University's Earth Scan Laboratory told the *New York Times*. "I see a huge oil plume being dragged in that direction," Chuanmin Hu of the University of South Florida told the *Times*. "It's like a river."

In the southern reaches of the Mississippi River Delta, a massive "tide" of thick sludge was found covering sensitive wetlands on Tuesday, the first time that dense oil has washed ashore on the Gulf Coast. The wetlands and estuaries of the Delta provide one of the highest-density centers of marine and bird life in North America. There is a high probability that a heavy coating of oil will irreparably harm these wetlands, which provide a crucial line of defense for New Orleans against hurricanes.

The spill is devastating the Gulf's multibillion-dollar fishing industry. On Tuesday, the Coast Guard extended its ban on fishing to an area encompassing 46,000 square miles of federal waters—or 19 percent of the US exclusive economic zone in the Gulf of Mexico. Previously the prohibition had applied to an area stretching from the Mississippi Delta to the Florida Panhandle.

So far, nothing has worked to stem the flow of oil. BP's effort to insert a hose into the broken pipe on the seafloor and carry the oil to a ship on the surface has been, even by its own estimation, of

limited value. CEO of US operations Lamar McKay told a senate committee on Tuesday that the method removed somewhere between 1,500 and 2,000 barrels of oil a day, and that this could conceivably be increased.

However, new video footage made public by Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer in Senate environmental committee hearings demonstrated that in spite of the inserted hose, oil was gushing out at a rate not appreciably different from that seen in earlier footage provided by BP. If BP's claim to be removing 1,500 to 2,000 barrels a day is true, the video footage would then appear to demonstrate that the total spill rate is far higher than the official estimate of 5,000 barrels, as a number of scientists have maintained.

As more evidence emerges demonstrating the scope of the Deepwater Horizon disaster, the Obama administration has redoubled its efforts to defuse popular anger, which is increasingly focused on Washington's role in creating the conditions for the spill. It is reported that President Obama will soon announce the formation of an investigative commission, and on Tuesday Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar appeared before two Senate committees to defend the administration response to the disaster.

The senate hearings gave no indication that federal regulators or executives at BP and Transocean will face consequences for the explosion and spill. The hearings also made clear that the administration is planning no substantive changes to the regulation of the oil industry. Salazar was repeatedly praised by senators at the two hearings, in spite of media accounts that portrayed a confrontational meeting. In both hearings he attributed the systemic corruption and regulatory breakdown at the Mineral Management Service (MMS) to "a few bad apples."

Questioned by Democratic Senator Benjamin Cardin of Maryland, Salazar could not say whether any new regulations or changes would be put into place on offshore drilling. He would only state that the Obama administration has "hit the pause button" in the issuance of new deep-sea drilling permits while the Department of the Interior prepares a report for Obama, due at the end of May.

In fact, no new permits were scheduled for the coming months, and the MMS has, in the interim, continued to grant "categorical exemptions," freeing oil concerns from producing environmental impact statements on their drilling operations. Scores of oil rigs continue to operate under the same conditions of complete deregulation that led to the Deepwater Horizon disaster, and some of these rigs operate in deeper water.

On Monday a former BP safety consultant asked a federal judge in Houston to issue an injunction to force BP to cease oil production at its Atlantis platform in the Gulf, which is located 124 miles off the coast in 7,000 feet of water. About 2,000 feet

deeper than the Deepwater Horizon, Atlantis is the deepest operating oil rig in the world.

In seeking the immediate injunction, Kenneth Abbott alleges the Obama administration has disregarded his allegations over safety violations aboard the Atlantis. "As bad as the Deepwater Horizon is, it's one well," Abbott told the *Houston Chronicle*. "This is several wells with three or four times the capability of destruction. BP just isn't doing normal engineering practices." Salazar is named as a defendant in the suit, along with the Department of the Interior and the MMS. Separately, environmentalist groups launched a lawsuit in an Alabama federal court to block 20 newly approved deep sea rig operations.

Obama's blue-ribbon commission will be made up of seven individuals who are not currently in government, according to reports. The commission will reportedly be tasked with investigating the causes of the spill and broader safety and environmental conditions within the industry. Media accounts did not say what, if any, prescriptive power such a commission would have. The proposed commission will join a bevy of investigations underway, including several Congressional inquiries, a joint MMS-US Coast Guard investigation, and separate internal probes launched by the corporations implicated in the disaster.

It can be stated with certainty that none of these commissions will seek out the roots of the Deepwater Horizon disaster. All of the politicians and regulators are committed to the defense of the profit drive of US corporate interests. They are, moreover, implicated just as deeply as BP.

Like the global financial crisis, the Deepwater Horizon disaster is not merely an accident. It was the inevitable result of decades of free market boosterism and deregulation. Both the Democrats and Republicans, the two US parties of big business, declared that rules governing the major industries were an intolerable barrier to profits. They promised deregulation would encourage job growth and would not endanger either workers or the environment. As the Deepwater Horizon spill makes clear, these policies have resulted in catastrophe for the population of the US and the world.



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