“Top kill” has yet to stop Gulf oil flow

Massive spill nation’s worst, study confirms

Tom Eley
28 May 2010

On Thursday afternoon, BP admitted that the success of its latest attempt to stem the flow of oil from the ocean floor, the so-called “top kill,” was in doubt. The effort to blast thousands of gallons of heavy mud directly into the Deepwater Horizon rig’s failed blowout preventer one mile beneath the water’s surface was suspended early Thursday morning so that BP could analyze data, company spokesmen said.

BP said a second attempt would be launched Thursday evening, and indicated that it might include golf balls, pieces of rubber and other objects—a so-called “junk shot.” It may take until the weekend to learn whether or not the top kill has stopped or even restricted the oil gush, the company said.

BP had not revealed to the media, or even the US government, that it had suspended the operation early Thursday, shortly after midnight. On Thursday morning an oblivious Thad Allen, commander of the US Coast Guard, claimed that the top kill had been a success and that no more oil was being emitted. That afternoon he said he thought BP was still pumping mud into the blowout preventer.

Allen’s early comments led to jubilant headlines in the US media, but within hours BP was urging caution before admitting in an evening press conference that the result of the effort was, at best, unclear. “What we do know is that we have not yet stopped the flow,” said BP Chief Operating Officer Doug Suttles. “I probably should apologize to folks that we haven’t been giving more data on that,” he said when he was asked why BP did not explain earlier that it had suspended the top kill. “It was nothing more than we are so focused on the operation itself.”

Earlier efforts to stop the spill using unmanned submarines, a four-story containment dome, and a tube to siphon off oil have also failed.

Meanwhile, the enormous scale of the disaster has come into sharper focus. New studies authored by the US Geological Survey (USGS) reveal that the spill in the Gulf of Mexico is many times worse than the estimate originally advanced by the Obama administration and BP. It is now certain to be the worst spill in US history and one of the worst ecological catastrophes in world history.

The USGS estimates the leakage rate falls in a range of between 500,000 and 1 million gallons per day. This would mean that somewhere between 17 million and 36 million gallons have been spilled, far more than the 11 million gallons of heavy crude lost by the Exxon Valdez in Alaska’s Prince William Sound.

Yet the actual magnitude of the spill may be far higher. For weeks after the April 20 explosion on the Deepwater Horizon, which took the lives of 11 workers, the Obama administration joined hands with BP and the Coast Guard in pushing a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) estimate of 5,000 barrels, or 210,000 gallons, per day. Steady criticism from scientists and mounting physical evidence finally forced the survey from the USGS, which operates within the Department of the Interior.

Steven Wereley, a professor of mechanical engineering at Purdue University, has come out with a far higher estimate. Analyzing only two of three leaks using computer particle analysis, Wereley told the House Energy Committee on May 19 that his best estimate was that the rate of the spill was 4.2 million gallons per day. If so, the spill has emitted upwards of 150 million gallons into the Gulf of Mexico.

BP has refused to allow scientists to measure the quantity of oil emitted below the water’s surface, repeatedly claiming that it was impossible to know how much oil was spilling and that “it’s not relevant to the response effort.”

Scientists reject both claims. “If we don’t know the total amount we are never really going to know where it all went,” points out earth science professor David Valentine of the University of California. According to

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Valentine, surface observations cannot be accurate for underwater spills, "especially when you have oil traveling such great distances from the sea floor to the sea surfaces and when you have dispersants and other things that are acting on the oil."

BP's position that the size of the spill is irrelevant to cleanup stands in contradiction to its own emergency planning statement. On the second page of the 583-page document is the following passage: "an accurate estimation of the spill's total volume…is essential in providing preliminary data to plan and initiate cleanup operations."

BP's transparent aim in obscuring the size of the spill is to limit its liability. "If they put off measuring, then it's going to be a battle of dueling experts after the fact trying to extrapolate how much spilled after it has all sunk or has been carried away," Lloyd Benton Miller, a lawyer who represented victims of the Exxon Valdez spill, told McClatchy Newspapers. "The ability to measure how much oil was released will be impossible."

Evidence continues to mount that the damage done beneath the water's surface is massive. A team of scientists from the University of South Florida on Thursday discovered an enormous plume of oil stretching 22 miles from the ruptured wellhead toward Mobile Bay in Alabama. The cloud of hydrocarbons is also about six miles wide and reaches from near the water's surface to 3,300 feet down.

David Hollander, associate professor of chemical oceanography at the University of South Florida, said the thickest concentration was found about 1,300 feet down. Hollander and other researchers believe that the plumes may have been created by the unprecedented use of chemical dispersants to break up the oil at its point of emission. The impact on marine life will be severe.

"There are two elements to it," Hollander told the Associated Press. "The plume reaching waters on the continental shelf could have a toxic effect on fish larvae, and we also may see a long-term response as it cascades up the food web."

Fears of what may be taking place underwater have been substantiated by diver Philippe Cousteau, Jr., grandson of the legendary French diver Jacques Cousteau. Diving with an ABC news crew off the Louisiana coast, Cousteau reported tiny oil droplets up and down the water column that coated his diving suit. He called what he saw a "nightmare" and "one of the most horrible things I've ever seen underwater."

The impact on Gulf Coast shores, which had been mitigated for weeks by favorable winds and currents, is now catastrophic. Louisiana officials report that over 100 miles of coastline have been fouled by heavy crude oil stretching much of the length of the Mississippi Delta, potentially suffocating estuaries and marshlands critical for the state's multibillion-dollar fishing industry.

The Mississippi Delta is one of the most important biological areas in North America. It is home to about 40 percent of all US wetlands, and provides habitat and breeding grounds to thousands of species of fish, reptiles, amphibians and birds. Additionally, it provides a major bulwark for heavily populated southern Louisiana against the hurricanes that regularly strike the region.

Tens of thousands will lose their livelihoods along the Gulf Coast. Fishing has been shut down in 20 percent of US waters in the Gulf with no end in sight, and tourism, critical along the coast as far as south Florida, has been severely damaged.

The spill's impact on human health is also a major concern. On Wednesday, seven fishermen engaged in spill cleanup in the Breton Sound area were hospitalized after complaining of nausea, dizziness, headaches and chest pains. West Jefferson Medical Center spokeswoman Taslin Alfonso said the men believed they became ill due to exposure to the chemical dispersant used by BP to break up the spill, Corexit.

In another ominous development for the Gulf Coast, NOAA on Thursday predicted one of the most severe hurricane seasons on record, including between 8 and 14 hurricanes, seven of which could be "major"—with winds of over 111 miles per hour. Major storms pose the threat of lifting oil off the seafloor and driving it further onto sensitive coastlines.

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