

Report found failure of blowout preventers common

Massive oil spill was foreseeable

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BP, the company that operated the Deepwater Horizon oil rig that exploded on April 20, is claiming that the spreading oil spill threatening US states along the Gulf of Mexico with economic and ecological disaster was unforeseeable.

Oil is now flowing into the Gulf at a rate of as high as 25,000 barrels a day due to the explosion and the subsequent failure of a blowout preventer (BOP), which is designed to plug the well in the event of an emergency. The BOP is still not responding to attempts to close it.

Neither the company nor the government had in place any backup plans in the event of a failure of the BOP. Options currently being considered to plug the well will take weeks or months to implement and may not be successful.

“We’re breaking new ground here,” said Coast Guard Commandant Thad Allen. “It’s hard to write a plan for a catastrophic event that has no precedent, which is what this was.”

But was a failure of the BOP really unforeseeable?

A 1999 report from the government’s Minerals Management Service (MMS), leaked by Democratic Senator Maria Cantwell of Washington, found that there were 117 BOP failures in a two-year period in the late 1990s.

While none of these failures resulted in a spill at the magnitude of the Deepwater Horizon, they clearly demonstrate the fallibility of BOPs. One crucial difference is that the other BOP failures occurred in

shallower waters.

There have also been a number of massive oil spills in recent years. “People in government and industry are saying that this is unprecedented, that it is impossible to be prepared for an event like this,” commented John Amos, president of SkyTruth, a non-profit firm that monitors oil spills and other environmental disasters. “But less than a year ago we had a very similar blowout and spill off the coast of Australia, from a two-year old rig.”

Amos was referring to the Montara oil spill, which dumped as much as 9 million gallons of oil into the Timor Sea between August and November 2009. (See, “Unanswered questions over Australian offshore oil spill” <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/nov2009/oils-n07.shtml>)

“No matter what technology we use, and what regulations we have, stuff will break and people will make mistakes,” Amos told the WSWS.

The disaster in the Gulf of Mexico is also being compared to an earlier disaster off the coast of Mexico in 1979 when the Ixtoc I oil well suffered a blowout followed by a BOP failure. The resulting spill lasted for nine months, pouring oil into the Gulf of Mexico that flowed north to Texas. The spill is considered to be the second largest in history.

In its own exploration plan filed with the MMS in February 2009, BP said that it was “unlikely that an accidental surface or subsurface oil spill will occur from the proposed activities” of the rig.

BP evidently did not consider it necessary to make any special preparations for this unlikely event, saying, “Due to the distance to the shore (48 miles) and the response capabilities that would be implemented, no significant adverse impacts are expected.”

Drilling companies have opposed mandates for so-called “acoustic switches,” which cost about \$500,000 and are an added line of defense in the event of a blowout. Norway and Brazil, two major oil drilling countries, require the devices, but the United States does not.

BP has also opposed stricter safety regulations. In a letter released by ABC News, Vice President of BP America, Richard Morrison, told the MMS that the company opposed “extensive, prescriptive regulations.”

“We believe industry’s current safety and environmental statistics demonstrate that the voluntary programs ... continue to be successful,” Morrison said.



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