

BP oil spill hits Gulf coast

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On Friday, an oil slick caused by last week's explosion and sinking of a British Petroleum oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico began washing ashore in Louisiana near the mouth of the Mississippi River, threatening catastrophic economic and environmental damage.

The Deepwater Horizon oil rig, located about 50 miles off the Louisiana coast, erupted in flames on April 20 when a concrete sealant failed and oil moved up piping from the ocean floor, about a mile beneath the surface of the water. The disaster claimed the lives of 11 workers and critically injured four more.

After burning for two days, the floating rig sank, buckling beneath it the piping connecting it to the oil well and causing at least three ruptures. A mechanism used to seal the well in the event of a blowout failed to activate, and crude oil has been gushing into the Gulf of Mexico at an estimated rate of 5,000 barrels, or 210,000 gallons, a day.

BP and the Obama administration at first claimed that there was no oil spill. After a slick on the ocean's surface increased to an area of about 320 square miles, BP said that 1,000 barrels were pouring forth. On Thursday BP admitted that the Coast Guard estimate of 5,000 barrels was more likely.

On Friday morning the BBC reported that the oil slick was roughly equivalent in size to Jamaica, and growing. It appeared set to continue washing ashore in Louisiana, and was likely to spread east along the gulf coastline in Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida.

Efforts to contain the spill and prevent further oil from reaching the ocean surface have achieved little. On Friday attempts to ring the slick with booms and administer controlled burns were hampered by wind and choppy seas. A high tide is expected Friday night, likely pushing oil further up delicate marshlands in the Mississippi delta.

Ultimately the spill must be stopped at its source near the

oil cap and crushed piping located 5,000 feet beneath the ocean's surface. Valves designed to shut the cap and remote controlled submarines have been unable to stop the hemorrhaging. Other methods—including placing a structure over the leaks or drilling holes nearby to divert oil from reaching the existing well—are experimental and would take weeks or months to implement.

In the meantime, the collapsed rig will likely continue to pump out about 210,000 gallons per day into the Gulf of Mexico. At this pace the Deepwater Horizon spill would by mid-June eclipse the disaster resulting from the sinking of the Exxon Valdez, which in 1989 dumped its payload of 10.8 million gallons of crude oil into remote Prince William Sound in Alaska.

In the worst case scenario oil could flow from the well until its supply is exhausted, which would likely result in a spill many times larger than the Exxon Valdez.

The economic impact of the Deepwater Horizon spill will be severe. The coast's multi-billion dollar fishing and tourism industries will suffer major losses, which will result in layoffs and job cuts. It is possible the slick could block shipping from the port of New Orleans—the nation's busiest in terms of freight tonnage. Shrimp and oyster fishermen have launched lawsuits against BP, rig operator Transocean, and Halliburton Energy Services, who subcontracted work on the drill hole.

"This might be our last day," oyster farmer Mitch Jurisich told the Associated Press. "This is who we are and what we do."

"If it gets in oyster reefs and grass beds—terribly productive areas—you don't exactly run a vacuum cleaner over it," said George Crozier, a marine biologist with the Dauphin Island Sea Lab in Alabama. "The grass beds are particularly fragile in our part of the world. So even trying to clean it would probably destroy them."

The environmental impact is incalculable. The estuaries, islands, and bayous of the Mississippi Delta—the area likely

to be hardest hit by the spill—contain 40 percent of all US wetlands and are home to hundreds of animal species.

“It is of grave concern,” said David Kennedy of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. “I am frightened. This is a very, very big thing. And the efforts that are going to be required to do anything about it, especially if it continues on, are just mind-boggling.”

For nearly a week the Obama administration said virtually nothing about the disaster—besides reiterating that the “incident,” as Obama called it, would in no way lessen its support for the lifting of a moratorium on offshore drilling up and down the Atlantic Coast. Two days after the explosion, when the fate of the missing 11 men was still unknown, a reporter asked White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs if Obama had yet “reached out to anyone in Louisiana over the oil rig explosion.” Gibbs responded, “Let me check on that. I don’t believe so.” The next day, Gibbs told reporters, “In all honesty I doubt this is the first accident that has happened and I doubt it will be the last.”

Finally, on Friday morning, senior Obama advisor David Axelrod admitted that the oil spill was a disaster that might temporarily delay further seabed oil exploration. Later in the day, Obama told a Rose Garden press conference that he had ordered Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar to report to him within 30 days if any new safeguards are needed for deep sea oil rigs.

Obama’s statement was “a largely symbolic gesture,” according to the Associated Press, since “no new leases are scheduled for the coming months.” Its transparent purpose was to protect Obama’s “planned expansion of offshore drilling,” according to the AP.

On Friday, the Obama administration dispatched two air force planes and a number of warships to assist in containing the slick, and Louisiana Governor Bobbie Jindal requested a call-up of about 6,000 National Guard soldiers. However, experts have said that miniature submarines used by the Navy would be of no help in stopping the leaks. Due to the topography and biology of the Mississippi Delta—muddy and rich in water vegetation—cleanup will prove difficult.

The parallels with Hurricane Katrina are striking. As that massive storm system approached the Gulf Coast in 2005, the Bush administration could not be roused to take elementary steps to assist area residents. Then, after Katrina struck, a stunned nation watched on television as desperate residents begged for relief. The Gulf Coast has never

recovered from Katrina, and now some experts have predicted that the Deepwater Horizon spill could prove more economically devastating.

The *Wall Street Journal* wrote of “a growing sense among many in Louisiana that the government failed them again, just as it did during Hurricane Katrina five years ago.”

“They lied to us,” fishing guide Cade Thomas told the *Journal*. “They came out and said it was leaking 1,000 barrels when I think they knew it was more. And they weren’t proactive. As soon as it blew up, they should have started wrapping it with booms.”

Why BP and the federal government did not take immediate precautions to cordon off the explosion area in the immediate aftermath of the explosion is just one of many questions that have emerged.

It has also been revealed that the Obama administration had buckled before BP and oil industry pressure, failing to implement new safety and environmental regulations under consideration last fall. A BP executive wrote a letter to the administration stating that self-regulation was adequate.

Among the regulations that BP and other oil concerns were able to block was the inclusion on all oil rigs of a device called an acoustic switch—commonly used in other oil-producing nations—that sends impulses through the water that can trigger an underwater valve to shut down the well in the event of a blowback. BP found the costs of these units, about \$500,000, excessive.

The oil giant reported \$5.598 billion in profits for the first three months of 2010.



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