

Obama administration defends BP response to oil spill disaster

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Amid growing popular anger over BP's disastrous response to the gulf coast oil spill, the Obama administration came to the company's defense on Monday, while again rejecting any federal takeover of the response.

Coast Guard Commandant Thad Allen defended BP's actions at a White House press conference on Monday, calling them "rational." Allen said that he could not see any reason why the federal government should take over the response to the oil spill.

Allen said that he was "satisfied with the coordination that is going on," and that BP is "exhausting every technical response" to the leak. He added that "There's no reason to make a change" to the official response to the oil spill. When asked to clarify whether BP or the US government was in charge of the cleanup, Allen said that the two were working in "partnership."

Allen's remarks served to clarify points made earlier Monday by state and federal officials in Louisiana, who made hollow threats against the company, but did not question its controlling role in the cleanup effort. Janet Napolitano, secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, echoed the statement of Interior secretary Ken Salazar that the government will keep its "boot on the neck" of BP. "We are on them, watching them," she said.

Democratic Senator Richard J. Durbin of Illinois threw in a sound bite as well, saying "BP in my mind no longer stands for British Petroleum—it stands for Beyond Patience." But these words only served to distract from his support for leaving BP in control of the cleanup. "Excuses don't count anymore," he said to the company, "You caused this mess, now stop the damage and clean up the mess. It's your responsibility."

BP, meanwhile, continued spraying the highly-toxic Corexit 9500 dispersant onto the Gulf of Mexico, despite a government order instructing it to stop by Saturday. BP has refused to comply with a separate demand issued by the government that it turn over all scientific data regarding the spill in its possession.

"BP basically told the EPA 'no' in very certain terms," said Rick Steiner, an oil spill expert and marine conservationist. Steiner said he found numerous inaccuracies in BP's response to a government demand that it provide recommendations for alternative dispersants, including the omission of one chemical, JD-2000, which may be less toxic than all the others on the list.

When asked how the government will respond to BP's defiance, Allen defended BP by saying its chosen dispersant is "an order of magnitude" less toxic than the oil itself.

"This bypasses the real issue, namely that dispersants actually make oil more toxic," said Steiner. The higher toxicity of dispersed oil is backed up by numerous studies, including one that concluded unequivocally that "dispersed oils were more toxic than crude oils."

"Despite everything, the Obama administration is saying: 'You're doing a heck of a job Brownie!' It's disgusting," said Steiner, invoking the infamous praise given by George W. Bush to his Federal Emergency Management Agency head, Michael Brown, for the government's catastrophic response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. "This is no different than Bush's response to Katrina."

Allen also reiterated the claim, repeated continuously since the April 20 explosion, that regulators had no way to foresee the failure of the Deepwater Horizon blowout preventer. This was, again, false, as demonstrated by a 2004 study by the Minerals Management Service,

which found that most blowout preventers failed at deep-sea drill sites.

Meanwhile, BP announced that it is siphoning much less oil from the spill than it had previously announced. The company had previously said that it was removing 5,000 barrels of oil every day by means of a tube inserted into the broken marine riser pipe, but on Monday reduced its estimate down to 1,000 barrels per day.

BP said that its latest attempt to shut down the leak, called a “top kill,” would be delayed till Wednesday. The company plans to inject drilling mud into the blowout preventer in an attempt to clog it. If this fails, the company will try the same thing, except with shredded tires. At Monday’s press conference, Allen said that he puts the likelihood of success of these actions at between 60 and 70 percent.

White House press secretary Robert Gibbs also insisted that the White House would not back down from its plans to promote offshore oil drilling. In response to reporters’ questions about Obama’s continued support for the program, Gibbs said only that that the White House has formed a panel to advise the president on ways to prevent future offshore drilling spills.

Despite the claims by the administration that it has put a moratorium on offshore oil drilling, the New York Times reported Monday that seven new permits for gulf drilling, as well as five environmental assessment waivers, have been issued since the moratorium supposedly went into effect. Minerals Management Service personnel told the Times that they had, in the newspaper’s words, “no intention of stopping all new oil and gas production in the gulf.”



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