

New evidence of criminal negligence in run-up to rig explosion

Failure of BP's “top kill” means oil will continue to flow for months

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Forty days after the explosion at the BP-leased offshore drilling rig, oil continues to flow unabated from the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico. After weeks of downplaying and covering up the extent of the disaster, government officials are now acknowledging that it is already the worst environmental catastrophe in the history of the United States ... with no end in sight.

Over the weekend, BP reported its latest attempt to stop the flow—the so-called “top kill” method—had failed. It announced plans for a new tactic, involving cutting off the leaking pipe and attempting to cap the oil. The proposal is unlikely to succeed, and could result in a significant increase in the rate of the flow after the pipe is cut. Even if it works, it will only contain a portion of the oil gusher.

“The failure of the top kill magnifies the disaster by an order of magnitude,” Rick Steiner, an oil spill expert and marine conservationist, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “The blowout will continue unquestionably over the next two months.”

BP is currently drilling separate wells designed to intersect with the existing well and plug the leak. These wells will not be ready until at least August, BP officials said on Sunday.

The US Geological Survey (USGS) has estimated that the flow is between 500,000 and 1 million gallons per day. At the higher range—which is still far smaller than the rate estimated by independent scientists—an additional 90 million gallons of oil will have been released by the end of August. In comparison, the Exxon Valdez released 11 million gallons.

If these reserve wells fail, the spill will continue until the entire reservoir is depleted. A BP spokesman said on Sunday that the company has no idea how much oil

is in the reservoir.

With the collaboration of the Obama administration and the US Coast Guard, BP has sought to restrict media access to the worst affected regions, as oil has begun to wash ashore on the coast. A CBS news team reported it was threatened with arrest by the Coast Guard as it attempted to reach an oiled beach. The team was told the restrictions were according to “BP’s rules.” Other media have confirmed that access is being increasingly chocked off.

Nevertheless, the immense scale of the disaster is gradually coming out, with scientists discovering giant undersea plumes, in addition to the massive slick spreading across the surface of the Gulf.

Two plumes have already been discovered, but this is “just the tip of the iceberg,” said Steiner. “Some of the oil is probably down around the coast of Florida. There may soon be tar balls on the south east coast of the state.”

Making matters worse, the Atlantic hurricane season begins on Tuesday, and scientists anticipate that it will be a very active year. A hurricane in the Gulf will surge oil deep into the wetlands and inland. “The first good hurricane will transfer this in the storm surge right into the bayous,” Steiner said. Hurricanes could also severely disrupt the drilling of the two additional wells being drilled by BP.

The Obama administration continues to cover for BP, even as new evidence has emerged documenting the criminal recklessness of the company in the run-up to the disaster. Obama has gone from saying that he is “angry and frustrated” to declaring that the spill is “enraging and heartbreaking.” However, the

administration continues to avoid any talk of accountability, while suggesting that neither BP nor the government could have possibly foreseen the catastrophe.

Carol Browner, the White House energy advisor, was asked Sunday on NBC's *Meet the Press* why BP had no contingency plan for the disaster. “[I]t's important to understand that these wells have been drilled for several decades now,” she replied. “There have not been these kinds of accidents.”

Browner refused to rule out future deepwater oil drilling in the Gulf, saying, “I want to see what the investigations tell us”

BP and the administration's claims that an accident of this magnitude could not have been predicted is belied by an increasing mountain of evidence that BP deliberately ignored warning signs, with the help of the federal Minerals Management Service.

Citing internal BP documents, the *New York Times* reported on Sunday that engineers expressed concern as early as June 2009 about the well casing used in the Deepwater Horizon operation. A report by a BP engineer that month warned that the casing could collapse under the high pressure at the depths BP was drilling.

“This would certainly be a worst-case scenario,” Mark E. Hafle, a senior drilling engineer at BP, wrote in the report. “However, I have seen it happen so know it can occur.”

According to the *Times*, “The company went ahead with the casing, but only after getting special permission from BP colleagues because it violated the company's safety policies and design standards. The internal reports do not explain why the company allowed for an exception.”

The *Times* goes on to report, “In April of this year, BP engineers concluded that the casing was ‘unlikely to be a successful cement job,’ according to a document, referring to how the casing would be sealed to prevent gases from escaping up the well.” The document also concluded that the casing was unlikely to fulfill regulatory requirements from the MMS.

“A second version of the same document says ‘It is possible to obtain a successful cement job’ and ‘It is possible to fulfill M.M.S. regulations.’” According to BP, the 180-degree shift in the evaluation was made after further testing.

In the weeks preceding the explosion on April 20, there were many signs of problems, including sudden and repeated releases of gas from the well.

“On at least three occasions, BP records indicate, the blowout preventer was leaking fluid, which the manufacturer of the device has said limits its ability to operate properly,” the *Times* reported. Loss of well control led to a halt of operations, but no assessment was made as to whether or not the drilling should continue.

“After informing regulators of their struggles, company officials asked for permission to delay their federally mandated test of the blowout preventer, which is supposed to occur every two weeks, until the problems were resolved, BP documents say.” After first denying this request, the MMS reversed itself.

According to the *Times*, “When the blowout preventer was eventually tested again, it was tested at a lower pressure—6,500 pounds per square inch—than the 10,000-pounds-per-square-inch tests used on the device before the delay. It tested at this lower pressure until the explosion.”

In other words, both BP and government officials were aware the well was causing major problems that could lead to a blowout, and that the blowout preventer itself was experiencing problems. Yet BP, with the agreement of the government agency, decided to rig the tests and ignore the warnings of a potential disaster so it could continue drilling.



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