BP containment effort set back as government acknowledges undersea oil plumes

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Efforts by BP to contain the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico continue to be plagued by setbacks and complications. On Wednesday, BP was forced to remove the cap it had placed over the leaking well earlier this month after an underwater robotic vehicle used to examine the well and perform repairs bumped into the cap causing one of its vents to close.

Engineers stationed on BP's Discover Enterprise containment ship realized something was wrong when they discovered gas inside a hose used to send hot water down to the cap to prevent ice crystals from forming inside it. The Discover Enterprise has been siphoning oil from a riser pipe connected to the cap for several weeks and the appearance of gas in the line threatened the safety of the crew. Because of this safety threat and the possibility of ice crystals having formed in the cap following the accident, it became necessary to remove and examine it.

The removal of the cap sent massive amounts of oil flowing freely into the Gulf of Mexico for a period of almost ten hours before it was replaced late on Wednesday after eight separate attempts. According to the latest numbers produced by the US government, oil is flowing from the ocean floor at a rate of 1.47 million to 2.52 million gallons per day. On Tuesday, BP's containment system had collected 700,056 gallons of oil, the most collected in a single day since the cap was first placed over the well.

While the incident on Wednesday sent hundreds of thousands more gallons of oil into the Gulf waters, federal scientists of the Joint Analysis Group (JAG), including researchers from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency, released their first report on subsurface oil contamination. Analyzing data collected during four expeditions from May 8 to May 25, the JAG report confirms what independent scientists have been saying all along: underwater plumes of oil extend for several miles beyond the Deepwater Horizon wellhead, a product of both the spill itself and the chemical dispersant used to break up oil in the water.

The report states that, "The preponderance of evidence based on careful examination of the results from these four different cruises leads us to conclude that [Deepwater Horizon] oil exists in subsurface waters near the well site in addition to the oil observed at the sea surface and that this oil appears to be chemically dispersed."

"During the time of these cruises," says the report, "approximately 230,000 gallons of subsea dispersants were used. If the subsurface oil was successfully dispersed into small droplets, processes can result in oil remaining in subsurface waters, with horizontal transport potentially more than 10 km beyond the well."

In spite of a virtual mountain of evidence to the contrary, BP executives have repeatedly denied the existence of subsurface oil plumes. During a June 9 appearance on NBC's "Today Show," BP's Chief Operating Officer Doug Suttles said, "We haven't found any large concentrations of oil under the sea. To my knowledge, no one has." Suttles added, "It may be down to how you define what a plume is here, but basically, what some people have asked is, are there large concentrations of oil under the sea? And those have not been found so far by us or anyone else that's

measuring this. The oil that has been found is in very minute quantities."

During a June 17 appearance before the House Energy and Commerce committee, BP CEO Tony Hayward was also asked if there were plumes of oil beneath the water's surface. Hayward would only say that "there are concentrations of oil" beneath the surface, only some of which he claimed was related to the Deepwater Horizon spill. Hayward added, "I'm not an oceanographic scientist."

As the environmental and economic disaster in the Gulf continues to spread, BP is going ahead with a risky drilling project just five miles off the shores of Alaska. The oil giant has already been granted all the permits necessary to proceed with operations. Rather than conduct its own regulatory assessment of the project, the Minerals Management Service allowed BP to carry out its own environmental safety review which it unsurprisingly then passed.

In spite of the fact that BP is setting up operations just miles off shore, the Liberty project is not officially recognized an "offshore drilling" project and will remain unaffected by any offshore drilling moratoriums. BP has constructed a 31-acre artificial island out of gravel on which the drilling rig will be stationed, making it, at least technically, an "onshore" operation.

Beginning on the island, BP will drill two miles straight down and then horizontally for as many as eight miles where it will then meet the Liberty oil reservoir at the bottom of the Beaufort Sea. The reservoir could deliver up to 100 million barrels of oil and hundreds of millions of dollars in profits.

The "extended reach" drilling to be carried out on the Liberty project presents a number of dangers. Extended reach drilling is more prone to high pressure "kicks" of gas shooting up from the ocean floor during drilling, which can lead to blowouts. The enormous undertaking will also mean that BP will use newly designed equipment including more powerful drills made from a new steel alloy manufactured by BP.

The operation will be carried out under the same conditions of secrecy and deregulation under which the Deepwater Horizon disaster has taken place.