

BP oil spill enters new regions of Gulf Coast

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As the oil gushing from the Deepwater Horizon spill continues to spread throughout the Gulf Coast, the unprecedented scope of the environmental disaster is becoming clearer. The failure of BP to bring a stop to the leak, along with the threat posed by an active hurricane season and a toxic mixture of oil and chemical dispersants reaching the Gulf's rapid Loop Current are laying the groundwork for an even greater catastrophe.

Hundreds of tar balls were spotted this week on the beaches of Alabama's Sand Island and Dauphin Island, as well as Florida's Destin Beach. Thursday brought reports, confirmed by disturbing photographs, of dozens of oil-soaked pelicans overwhelmed by the sludge on Louisiana's shores. Oil has now fouled at least 125 miles of coastline in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.

Deepwater coral reefs that span several hundred yards on the ocean floor and are home to several species discovered in the Gulf Coast in September 2009 are being threatened with suffocation by the massive plumes of oil floating beneath the water's surface. One of these reefs is located just 20 miles north of BP's ruptured well.

Oil from the Deepwater Horizon spill continues to make its way eastward and is now threatening the coasts of Florida. Florida Governor Charlie Crist reported witnessing two large oil sheens, one of which appeared to be no more than three miles from the shores of Pensacola Beach and another approximately 10 miles away from the shore as he flew over coastal waters on Thursday. The oil is expected to wash ashore sometime on Friday.

The spread of oil to Florida's coasts will have an enormous impact on the state's fishing and tourism industries. Small charter boat businesses and hotels along the coast have already reported a drop in business.

According to a projection by the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR), made public on Thursday, oil merging with the Gulf's Loop Current will make its way around the Florida peninsula around day 70 of the disaster and reach the coast of North Carolina by day 80. From there, the oil would be sent eastward into the Atlantic Ocean. If the oil was taken up by the Atlantic Gulf Stream, it could travel at speeds of up to 100 miles per day and 3,000 miles per month. The environmental effects of such a large and rapid distribution of oil and chemical contamination would be unprecedented.

Adding to these dangers, the 2010 Atlantic Hurricane Season officially began on June 1. This season is predicted to be especially active with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) expecting up to 23 tropical storms, up to 14 of which may become hurricanes. Strong storms could sweep the toxic mixture of oil and chemical dispersants from the Gulf far inland, contaminating rivers, wildlife and even residential areas that might have escaped exposure under other circumstances.

In the event of strong tropical storms or hurricanes, workers attempting to stop the flow of oil into Gulf would have to evacuate the area and containment efforts would grind to a halt for a period of days or weeks.

Because of the increasing threat posed to the environment by spreading oil, NOAA was forced to expand the area covered by their fishing ban for three consecutive days beginning May 31. As it stands, 37 percent of the Gulf of Mexico, or 88,522 square miles, is now closed to fishing. Large areas off the coast of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama are shut down. Federal waters near the Florida panhandle have also been closed.

"Fishing communities are suffering a worst case scenario of total collapse," Carl Safina, an ecologist

with Blue Ocean Institute, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “I don’t see how this could be temporary. The basis of their livelihood is being destroyed.”

The potential magnitude of the spill through August, said Safina, “makes me wonder if we’re just going to completely ruin the Gulf of Mexico. It is plausible that the Gulf of Mexico could become a poisonous place for millions of animals and where people trying to make a living will be ruined.”

BP’s latest attempt to stem the flow of oil from the ocean floor has not gone smoothly. While attempting to cut through a leaking riser pipe in preparation for capping the leak, the diamond wire saw used to do the cutting became stuck in the pipe. One possibility for this failure is that materials forced into the pipe during last week’s “top kill” attempt may have actually caused the saw blade to dull.

On their next attempt to cut into the pipe, BP chose to use shear cutters measuring some twenty feet in length. This time they were successful, but because they used shear cutters instead of the more precise saw blade, the cutting did not go as cleanly as hoped. This means the cap still to be lowered over the leak will not fit as securely as it might have. The rougher cut also means that a different cap than the one intended may also have to be used. Because of these setbacks, there is a strong possibility the latest plan could fail altogether.

In the interim, most experts agree that the maneuver has actually increased the flow of oil into the Gulf. By breaking off the riser pipe, BP also removed kinks in the piping that had restricted oil.

US Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen painted the latest measures as a great success. “For the first time in a couple of days, I have some good news,” began Allen at the Thursday morning conference. Allen described the efforts as “a significant step forward.” His remarks echoed those of BP CEO Tony Hayward who called the latest containment effort an “important milestone.”



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