The history of a cover-up

New evidence undermines latest BP-White House estimate of spill size

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On Thursday, BP and Obama administration efforts to conceal the size of the Deepwater Horizon spill were delivered another blow when teams of scientists estimated that the rate of the oil spill as of early last week was between 30,000 and 50,000 barrels (1.2 million to 2.1 million gallons) per day, and possibly higher.

The figures are staggering. Fifty-three days after the explosion on the Deepwater Horizon that killed 11 workers, somewhere between 63 million and 107 million gallons of oil have spilled into the Gulf of Mexico, according to the latest estimates. Between every five and nine days the spill equals the Exxon Valdez, which dumped about 11 million gallons into Alaska's Prince William Sound in 1989.

An Associated Press analysis notes that, even taking the low-end estimate, "if those 63 million gallons of oil were put in gallon milk jugs, they would line up side by side for nearly 5,500 miles."

Some scientists, among them Ira Leifer of the government-sponsored Flow Rate Technical Group (FRTG), believe that BP's decision to cut the riser pipe in order to siphon off a portion of the oil may have actually made the spill far worse. The well could feasibly release as many as 10 million gallons per day, according to a worst-case scenario revealed in paperwork BP submitted for each of its two relief wells.

It appears the spill will continue at least until mid-August—a minimum of 60 more days—and will perhaps drag on into September. This is when relief wells drilled diagonally to intercept with and plug the Deepwater Horizon's may be completed—although there is no certainty that these can succeed. If it has not done so already, the BP spill by then will have easily eclipsed the worst oil spill on record, the 140 million gallons the Ixtoc I rig dumped off of Mexico's Gulf coast in 1979 and 1980. According to marine biologists, the environmental and human impacts of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill are already far worse than the Ixtoc I, which was mitigated by its location and favorable currents.

The worst oil spill in human history has been, since its first days, the subject of a cover-up carried out by BP and the White House. The Obama administration and the oil giant have repeatedly been forced to increase their estimates in the face of scientific criticism, even as they collude to deny scientists and engineers access to the spill site. But each new official estimate, it has been revealed, was only the latest lie.

The effort to obscure the spill's dimensions—based on profit calculations for BP and the Obama administration's desire to promote deep-sea oil drilling—has, from the beginning, made it impossible to determine the best way to respond to the spill. The distance the spill can travel—and the level of the toxicity it can maintain—are based largely on its volume.

When the explosion took place on the Deepwater Horizon on April 20, there was a very high likelihood that the rig would collapse, in which case the riser connecting it to the ocean floor one mile below would crumple and burst. This is in fact what happened. But neither BP nor the Obama administration took practical steps to prepare for that eventuality.

On April 23, even after the rig collapsed, BP insisted there was no spill. This was seconded by Coast Guard officer Mary Landry, who for weeks functioned as spokesman for BP. Oil visible on the surface, BP and the Coast Guard claimed, was fuel from the collapsed rig.

At the time, BP hoped that the failed blowout preventer could be activated by robots to cut off the flow. This proved impossible.In these first four days after the explosion, the attempts of BP and the Obama administration to dismiss the possibility of a spill cost the Gulf Coast dearly. Some experts say that if booms could have been used to encircle what was then a very small spill area, a much larger disaster could have been averted. No such steps were taken.

It was not until a large spill, many miles in diameter, became visible on the ocean's surface on April 24 that BP admitted

there was a spill beyond the fuel that had been aboard the rig. By then the spill was so large booms could not be used to contain it. Presenting no evidence, BP next claimed that a maximum of 1,000 barrels (42,000 gallons) per day were spilling into the Gulf—a large spill, to be sure, but nothing in comparison to the Exxon Valdez. The claim could not be verified because BP—backed by the Obama administration—refused to allow independent scientific analysis, and refused even to release images of the pipe.

Nonetheless, scientists soon refuted BP's claims. Ian MacDonald, an oceanographer at Florida State University, analyzed only the surface spill to estimate that 9 million gallons of heavy crude had been spilled by April 28, a clip of about 30,000 barrels (1.3 million gallons) per day. SkyTruth, a non-profit environmental analysis firm, put the figure at 12.2 million gallons by May 2, about the same rate. These rates, if they held, would mean that upwards of 60 million gallons would now be spilled—similar to the low-end FRTG released on June 10.

Criticism from these and other scientists finally forced the White House to acknowledge the spill was larger than BP claimed. On April 28, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), estimated that the spill could be at most 5,000 barrels (210,000 gallons). The statistic came under immediate and sharp criticism from scientists who noted it was based on a methodology not at all applicable to the BP spill. The 5,000 barrel figure was nonetheless seized on by the media—and after several more days of sticking to the 1,000 barrel claim—by BP as well. Particularly dishonest was the *New York Times*. The *Times* had earlier penned an editorial demanding that Obama not relinquish his expansion of deep-sea drilling. On May 4, the newspaper published an absurdly-reasoned "news analysis" ("Gulf Oil Spill Is Bad, but How Bad?") that attempted to raise doubts over whether the spill was a significant event at all. (See, "New York Times minimizes Gulf oil spill").

BP reportedly has had 12 video cameras providing live footage of the spill from the ocean floor since soon after the explosion, but for weeks it refused to allow the public—and possibly even the Obama administration—the right to view this footage. After mounting criticism, BP on May 12 released a brief, pre-recorded clip of one of what was reported to be three leaks in the collapsed riser pipe.

A journalist from National Public Radio (NPR) took the footage to three experts for separate types of scientific analysis. The results were shocking. Timothy Crone, a scientist at the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, put the spill rate at 50,000 barrels (2.1 million gallons) per day. University of California astrophysics professor Eugene Chaing put it in a range of 20,000 to 100,000 barrels daily. Steven Wereley of Purdue University used particle image velocimetry to establish a spill rate of 70,000 barrels per day—which he soon increased to 95,000 barrels—with a margin of error of 20 percent.

In the face of this evidence, the Obama administration and BP steadfastly clung to the official rate of 5,000 barrels per day, repeatedly claiming that there was no way to know how much oil was gushing forth on the ocean floor, and that in any case, knowledge of the dimensions of the spill would not impact the response.

These were both lies. In fact, there were a number of means for calculating the spill rate. BP was aware of at least one of these, since it had recruited two scientists from the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts to oversee the implementation of a sonar device for measuring the spill rate. Richard Camilli and Andy Bowen, who have performed many similar measurements, "were poised to fly to the gulf to conduct volume measurements," the *Times* reported on May 14. "But they were contacted [just before their departure] and told not to come, at around the time BP decided to lower a large metal container to try to capture the leak. That maneuver failed. They have not been invited again."

Scientific criticism, mounting popular anger, and the enormous spread of the spill finally forced NOAA to authorize the FRTG study. On May 27, the Obama administration revealed that the group had established a range of the spill of between 12,000 and 19,000 barrels per day. This too was a lie. In fact, the 12,000 to 19,000 figure represented the range of *absolute minimum* figures of the various scientists involved. They had not yet come up with a high-end range. Finally, yesterday, on June 10, the scientists on the FRTG released a new range for the rate of the spill of between 30,000 barrels, low-end, and 50,000 barrels.

This data, however, is based on the leak before the riser cut. Leifer told the *New York Times* on Tuesday that the spill was emitting "way more than it did before [the cut]. I don't mean by 20 percent. I mean multiple factors." For his part, Obama's Energy Secretary Steven Chu—who, as a University of California researcher received a huge grant from BP—insisted that cutting the riser pipe did not significantly increase the rate of flow. He also told Reuters that he felt confident that the moratorium on new deepwater oil drilling could soon be lifted.