

# Gulf Coast residents outraged at BP, government response

Andre Damon, C. W. Rogers in Louisiana

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Gulf Coast residents are seething in anger at BP and the federal government for their inability to contain the oil spill and deal with its consequences.

Residents are nearly unanimous in their dissatisfaction with BP's conduct of the cleanup, and many see the official response as incompetent and riddled with corruption.

There is widespread suspicion of a conspiracy between BP and the government to keep the public uninformed of the extent of the spill.

Workers in the petroleum industry were among the most outspoken critics. Deneen, an employee of EMI petroleum in Houston, said she thought BP, together with the government, was engaged in a coverup.

"They knew immediately how much was coming out of that well. Anybody can figure out how much fluid comes out of a flow line. It's a basic calculation. They were trying to fool people who weren't in the oil and gas business, but they sure as hell couldn't fool anybody who works in it," she said.

BP and the Obama administration have been forced to steadily increase their estimate of the flow rate, from initially claiming there was no spill, to succeeding figures of 1,000, 5,000, 12,000, 25,000, and finally 30,000-60,000 barrels a day.

Deneen also said she thinks BP is deliberately choosing not to employ certain available measures to stop the leak because it wants to continue harvesting oil from the well.

"If you ask me, BP could have capped the well by now," Deneen said. "But they don't want to. As soon as you cap a well, you no longer own it. Another company can take it over. They're trying to control the well, and that's why it's taking so long. When a well is sealed, it's inaccessible," she said.

Among residents, the White House's response, particularly Obama's press appearances and visits to the gulf, are viewed with disdain.

Chester, a transportation contractor who works around the oil industry, said he was not impressed with Obama's June 15 address from the Oval Office. "Obama's about as smooth as smooth could be. But history has been made, and he can't keep up with it," he said.

Deneen agreed. "Obama's not responding; he's acting for the cameras. The only reason he made those four trips [to the Gulf] was because of the criticism he was getting from the general public.

"Obama has no power; he works for the companies," she added. "It's all about money; a *ménage à trois* between the government, the regulators and the companies."

"I think that the government should have taken this in their hands a long time ago," said Pamela, of Boothville, Louisiana. "I think BP is just piddling around."

Much of the public anger arises in response to the autocratic nature of the cleanup. "People are angry about the fact that they have no control over the recovery," said Laura Leckelt, a nurse at West Jefferson Medical Center stationed at Grand Isle, Louisiana, one of the centers of the oil spill response.

"BP is running the Gulf Coast like it's a prison and they're the wardens," said Nathalie Walker, attorney and co-director of the group Advocates for Environmental Human Rights. "They dictate the terms," she said.

"There are plenty of regular folk who want to help," said Deneen. "But BP is controlling everything; you have to go through them if you want to help, and they just turn you away."

"I think the cleanup workers are as angry as anyone else. But they're afraid of speaking out, because they signed away their rights to speak to the media when they joined. If they talk, they'll get fired."

Ms. Leckelt said that the fishermen's wives have been particularly vocal about the conditions facing their husbands. Many have spoken out at town hall meetings,

including one in Grand Isle last week that addressed the health and environmental problems caused by the spill.

Over a hundred cases of health issues officially believed to be related to the spill have been reported, and thousands more are likely to follow.

The spill has already devastated the seafood industry in southern Louisiana. Last week, Ameripure Oysters, a \$20-million seafood company based in Franklin, La, was shutting its doors, leaving hundreds of employees without work.

Dean Blanchard, owner of Dean Blanchard Seafood Inc., said that he plans to close his operations in Southern Louisiana after his company suffered a \$3 million loss this season from the spill. “We’re on our second boat today,” he said. “If things were back to normal we’d be at about seventy-five.”

Blanchard said he blamed every level of the government for failing to regulate BP. “The United States government is crooked. They all took money from BP. They let them do what they wanted; nobody was regulating them.

“BP was giving money to the MMS, giving money to Congress, senators, representatives—the president, the whole system is bought and paid for,” he said.

He said that the government should have taken over the response from BP long ago. With the present situation, “Nobody’s in charge, nobody’s taking responsibility, nobody knows what’s going on; it’s like a big money grab,” he said.

Blanchard said he thinks that that BP’s holdings should have been seized in response to the disaster. “If they were drug dealers, the government would have seized their assets. I don’t think the BP executives are any better than common drug dealers. Drug dealers destroy lives, BP destroys lives. What’s the difference?”



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