

First storm of Gulf hurricane season highlights threat to oil spill operations

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The first tropical storm of the 2010 Atlantic/Gulf hurricane season formed Saturday in the western Caribbean. It crossed Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula Sunday and entered the Gulf of Mexico, where it could grow to hurricane size rapidly.

According to the US National Hurricane Center, tropical storm Alex is tracking west northwest towards Mexico's Caribbean coast or the Texas-Mexico border, although there remains a possibility that it could shift eastward towards Louisiana.

The storm's arrival has produced mounting concern that tropical storms and hurricanes could disrupt operations at the BP drilling site, including both containment of the oil spilling out of the well, and efforts to drill two relief wells nearby.

June 1 marked the official start of the hurricane season, but there seems to have been little advance preparation by BP or the Obama administration. BP and Coast Guard officials "are preparing contingency plans that would suspend the oil collection operation and delay the drilling of relief wells until the storm passes, steps that would allow even more oil to gush into the gulf," the *New York Times* reported.

Disaster site commander Admiral Thad Allen told a press briefing that containment and drilling operations would have to be shut down five days before winds of gale force—about 45 miles per hour—are forecast. The long lead-time is required because of the huge scale of the activities related to the Deepwater Horizon site, with some 30,000 workers and 6,000 vessels of all kinds involved. "At some point we're going to have to break production and get those production units to a safer locale," Allen said. "There are a lot of people on those rigs out there."

Another factor is the likelihood that a storm of gale force could increase to hurricane strength quite rapidly

as it travels over the open waters of the Gulf. Given the problematic character of hurricane forecasts, five-day advance warnings are unlikely to be very precise, raising the prospect of frequent shutdowns, whenever a significant storm is within hundreds of miles of the disaster site.

Senator Bill Nelson, a Florida Democrat, issued an appeal Friday for Navy vessels to be pre-positioned to help skim oil after the passage of a major storm. "Figure several days downtime as the storm approaches, a few more days as the storm passes, and a couple more days to get things back into place—and you're facing up to 10 days or more of the well gushing some 60,000 barrels a day unchecked," he wrote. "That's 600,000 barrels we'd then have to collect quickly after a storm passed, and before it could hit parts of the Gulf Coast."

These figures, which likely underestimate the disruptive effect of a major storm, would mean the equivalent of two or three Exxon Valdez-size oil spills just during the period that containment operations are shut down.

A tropical storm can create a coastal surge as high as 12 feet, while Hurricane Katrina generated a storm surge estimated at 30 feet high. In such a situation, storm-driven water, befouled with oil, would hit a coastline, much of which has a shallow and gently sloping sea bottom. The worst-case scenario, particularly in the Louisiana bayou region, would be oil-laced water pushed many miles inland.

A BP spokesman told the Associated Press that the company was working to shorten the time needed to secure or move all of its equipment from five days to two, by developing a containment system that would be easier to disconnect and hook back up.

This only underscores the completely makeshift and

haphazard character of the BP response to the Gulf disaster. BP is only now setting up a corporate division specifically tasked with containing the spill and shutting down the blowout.

BP executive Robert Dudley—designated to head the Gulf disaster operation in place of CEO Tony Hayward—admitted to the press that disaster recovery “is not a core competency with us.” He said the company was negotiating for the services of James Lee Witt, director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the Clinton administration, who now runs a private consulting company.

Such comments only underscore the irrationality of allowing BP to control the entire containment and well-capping operation, which is inevitably subordinated to the giant oil corporation’s profit incentives, rather than the needs of the people of the Gulf coast.

Dudley’s remark came as the first large patches of oil began washing ashore on the Mississippi Gulf coast, hitting tourist beaches at Ocean Springs, east of Biloxi, and other locations. Oil had previously hit offshore barrier islands, but not the Mississippi mainland.

There has been no containment or cleanup effort as yet, state officials said, because no BP contractors were on site to do the work. A spokesman for the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality told the Associated Press, “We cannot clean up or catch the oil until BP gets here. They have all of our people.”

Meanwhile, the chairman of a House panel investigating the causes of the Gulf oil disaster said Friday that BP would not let several of its employees testify. Rep. Bart Stupak, a Michigan Democrat, said BP had cited its own internal investigation as the reason for denying access to a half-dozen employees that the committee wants to question.



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