BP spill washes ashore in Florida

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5 June 2010

The BP oil spill continues to spread. On Friday, oil globules and sheen washed ashore on the Florida panhandle's white sand beaches, delivering a heavy blow to the state's struggling tourism industry. In Louisiana, heavy oil pushed its way further into biologically-rich estuaries and marshlands, and horrific examples of oil-soaked birds and dead wildlife continued to proliferate.

BP and the Obama administration have given up on stopping the eruption of oil entirely until one of two relief wells being drilled can reach it—mid-August at the earliest.

A new attempt to reduce the spill rate—which ranges from 500,000 gallons to 4 million gallons per day according to a range of government and independent estimates—met with limited results on Friday.

BP reported that a cap placed over the recently severed riser pipe had allowed it to capture some of the oil, but video footage indicated that the vast bulk continued to gush out into the Gulf. Coast Guard commander Thad Allen estimated that the cap was capturing oil at a daily rate of 1,000 barrels, far below the official estimate of the spill, which is between 12,000 and 19,000 barrels. Moreover, BP likely increased the daily flow of oil into the Gulf by between 1,200 and 4,000 barrels by cutting the riser pipe on Thursday in preparation for the cap.

Officials claim that the cap, which is connected by a new riser to a ship on the surface, can potentially collect as much as 90 percent of the oil being spilled. The precise size of the flow remains unknown because BP, backed by the Obama administration, refuses to allow independent analysis, even though a number of scientists have said that there are readily available means for measuring the volume of the spill.

According to a McClatchy News Service analysis, BP stands to make money on the spilled oil, should its effort to siphon it through the new riser pipe prove even partially successful. The company could make as much as $85 million on the oil over the next 60 days. The federal government would realize far less, $19 million in royalties over the same period, according to the study.

The siphoning of oil would be shut down in the event of a major tropical storm or hurricane. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has projected a particularly severe hurricane season.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina passed directly over what is now the Deepwater Horizon site, as have several other major hurricanes. Scientists debate what effects a hurricane might have on a major oil spill, but there is general agreement that it will push the damage far deeper into the Mississippi Delta than what otherwise might be expected.

In addition to the extensive damage in Louisiana, beaches in Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi are now suffering from the spill, and are likely unsafe for bathers. Fishing has already been closed in a vast area of the Gulf off the four states' coastlines. Only last week, Obama, hustling for the tourism industry, was urging Americans to visit the Gulf coast, declaring its beaches to be "clean and safe."

Waves of sticky tar balls washed ashore near Pensacola's famed beaches on Friday, forcing swimmers to evacuate. David Lucas, from Jonesville, Louisiana, left Pensacola Beach with a group of friends after they waded through oil in the water. "It was sticky brown globs out there," Lucas told the Associated Press.

At what should be the peak of its tourist season, Pensacola Beach was reportedly deserted. Wendi Butler, 40, who moved to the beach city shortly before the spill, told the AP she cannot find a job. "Restaurants are cutting back to their winter staffs because of it," she said. "They're not hiring."

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Tar balls also washed up on Florida's Navarre Beach. Eddie Kiihnl, who owns a construction firm, said the disaster has damaged the area economy. "Needless to say, this has hammered our business, too," he told the *Pensacola News Journal*. "We're not doing a lot of work because people are anticipating there may not be any renters."

The spill also hit beaches in Gulf Shores, Alabama, in the form of "gobs of reddish oil." Tourist Jennifer Powell, from Kentucky, said she would leave and most likely not return for a planned trip later in the summer. "I don't want my kids in that," she said. According to a local news station, "cleanup crews were nowhere to be seen."

The National Center for Atmospheric Research this week produced computer simulations that suggest the spread of the spill may soon accelerate. After being picked up by powerful ocean currents, within about three weeks the spill will have wrapped around Florida, and in ten more days will have made its way up to North Carolina. From there it will move at a clip of about 100 miles per day toward northern Europe, according to the model.

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