

Obama signals no end to deep-sea oil drilling

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The US will resume issuing new permits for deep-sea oil drilling after a six-month moratorium expires, President Obama signaled at a White House press event Tuesday.

A new federal commission tasked with investigating the Deepwater Horizon spill, which has dumped tens of millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, will seek to create “safe” conditions for the continuance of oil exploration and production on the outer continental shelf, Obama declared.

“Only then can we be assured that deepwater drilling can take place safely,” Obama said. “Only then we can we accept further development of these resources.... Only then can we be confident that we’ve done what’s necessary to prevent history from repeating itself.”

With these three sentences Obama concluded the brief media event. He did not take questions.

In fact, the moratorium currently in place only applies to the issuance of new permits for deep-sea sites. A number of deep-sea rigs—some operating in deeper waters than the Deepwater Horizon—continue to operate, as do thousands of shallow-water rigs.

Obama was flanked in the Rose Garden by commission heads Bob Graham, the former Democratic governor of Florida, and William K. Reilly, the former Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) chief under George H.W. Bush. Both are establishment political figures in good standing. Graham was a long-time member of the New Democrats, a right-wing grouping that pushed for deregulation in various sectors of the economy, and Reilly has intimate ties to the oil and chemical industries, sitting on the board of directors of both ConocoPhillips and chemical giant Du Pont.

Obama has yet to fill out the rest of the seven-member commission, but there are indications that the oil industry will have representation beyond just Reilly.

As Obama’s closing sentences made clear, the commission’s central purpose will be to give the oil industry a clean bill of health for deep-sea oil drilling. It will therefore likely focus on several “mistakes” that made the Deepwater Horizon disaster possible. Once these are discovered, drilling on the outer continental shelf will again be declared safe.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with scientists and environmentalist groups that questioned whether deep-sea drilling could be declared safe after such a review.

“The reality is that when you’re trying to seal holes that can be 20,000 to 30,000 feet below the surface, there’s simply no proven technology for doing this,” said Kieran Suckling of the Center for Biological Diversity, which also opposes shallow-water drilling. “This is not the first major spill in the Gulf and it won’t be the last

if they continue to drill,” Suckling added.

Suckling said that any commission that includes members with prominent ties to the oil industry could not possibly produce an objective analysis of the disaster. He called it “very disturbing” that Reilly was tapped to chair the commission. “It’s a foregone conclusion that the commission will call for modest reforms and ultimately approve issuing new permits,” Suckling concluded.

Carl Safina, a biologist with the Blue Ocean Institute, agreed. “I don’t think it can ever be done completely safely,” he said. “But they’ve apparently made it much more unsafe by cutting corners and hurrying up.”

Reidar Hindrum, a scientist and oil cleanup expert who works for Norway’s Directorate for Nature Management, said that spills occur even in the more highly regulated Norwegian oil industry, which mines the relatively shallow waters of the North Sea. “They say there’s more security in Norway than in the Mexican Gulf,” Hindrum said. “But you can never guarantee that it can be 100 percent safe. You can look at it as an unlucky situation, but it’s part of the industry. It can happen everywhere.”

Once again, Obama refrained from criticizing BP, whose determination to cover up the size of the spill and efforts to protect its revenue have greatly exacerbated the catastrophe. If anything, Obama’s indication that deep-sea drilling would resume represented a lifeline to BP, whose share values tumbled by about 13 percent on Tuesday, the first trading day after its latest efforts to stanch the gushing of oil, the so-called “top kill” and “junk shot,” failed.

While the administration carries on its overriding concern—the protection of the interests of Big Oil—it took steps on Tuesday to disassociate itself from BP. Since the April 20 explosion on the Deepwater Horizon, which took the lives of 11 workers, the federal government has functioned as little more than an adjunct of the London-based oil giant, generating growing popular hostility in the process.

Attorney General Eric Holder on Tuesday visited the Gulf Coast for the first time since the incident, where he held discussions with state attorneys general from Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. Holder said that a criminal probe was under way related to possible “malfeasance” in the lead-up to the disaster, although he did not mention BP or rig owner and operator Transocean by name.

There has been an enormous amount of testimony and scores of documents that reveal that BP, Transocean, and perhaps cement contractor Halliburton and blowout preventer manufacturer Cameron International, are criminally negligent for the disaster. Among other revelations, it has become clear that numerous steps

in the drilling process were bypassed, warnings of impending disaster were disregarded, and safety equipment did not function.

Yet the administration's reluctance to pursue an investigation of BP and allied concerns is due in no small part to the government's own criminally negligent role in the disaster. The explosion and resulting oil slick are the products of a total regulatory breakdown involving several federal agencies that played out over years, continuing into the Obama White House. At every step the federal government granted approval to BP's plans and disregarded its abuses, with the Obama administration even excusing it from providing legally required environmental impact studies for the Deepwater Horizon site.

This was underscored by a new *Wall Street Journal* report, also published Tuesday, which found that in the week before the disaster BP requested—and received—regulatory approval to make three changes in its drilling plans within the space of 24 hours. One of these was approved by the Minerals Management Service (MMS) within five minutes of submission. All three requests had to do with BP using a single pipe casing, presumably to save time, rather than the industry “gold standard” of double casing, according to experts quoted by the *Journal*. The changes very likely contributed to the disaster.

The administration on Tuesday also ended the practice of joint news conferences with BP executives, which “have not always bolstered the government's stature as the commanding authority in the crisis,” as the *Washington Post* put it. Government officials have acted as BP employees in the conferences, especially chief Coast Guard spokesperson Mary Landry, who since late April often appeared at the side of BP's chief operating officer Doug Settles at Unified Area Command headquarters in Louisiana, offering rosy interpretations of the disaster and glowing accounts of BP's efforts. On Tuesday, Landry was reassigned elsewhere.

With the failure of its top kill procedure, which aimed to plug the hole by firing hundreds of thousands of gallons of heavy mud at it, BP on Tuesday launched an attempt to cut the well's riser near the ocean floor in order to place a dome above the rig's blowout preventer. The dome—smaller than the one that failed last month when frozen natural gas hydrates clogged it—would be connected by a new riser leading up to ships on the water's surface. Antifreeze agents would be pumped down to avoid clogging.

The experimental procedure will take days and, in the short term, will actually increase the rate of the spill by 20 percent or more. By cutting the riser, BP will eliminate all kinks in the piping that, like an uncoiled garden hose, are currently restricting flow. In the best-case scenario the method will only capture a share of the oil, experts agree.

“We're all concerned about it,” an anonymous technician working on the project told the *New York Times*. “We simply do not have the data about the internal geometry of the blowout preventer,” he admitted, defying a BP gag order on speaking to the media.

Full closure of the gushing oil must wait until at least August, when it is anticipated that two relief wells now being drilled may reach the Deepwater Horizon site. However, a number of experts have warned that this procedure may well take much longer.

“The probability of them hitting it on the very first shot is

virtually nil,” said David Rensink, president-elect of the American Association of Petroleum Geologists. “If they get it on the first three or four shots they'd be very lucky.” In the event of heavy storms or hurricanes, the effort will have to be suspended, as will any oil siphoning taking place via the new containment dome. Climatologists anticipate a particularly active hurricane season, which officially began on Tuesday.

“Will hurricanes trump the capping procedures or even the whole operation?” questioned Donald Van Nieuwenhuise, a University of Houston petroleum geosciences professor, quoted in the *Times*. “That's the wild card.”

Meanwhile, a growing number of experts are warning that the Gulf of Mexico may be irreparably harmed by the spill with untold consequences for the people of the region. On Tuesday, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) extended its ban on commercial and sport fishing to nearly one third of the Gulf's US waters, or 76,000 square miles, an area about the size of Great Britain. The fishing industry, which directly employs tens of thousands in the Gulf, is already devastated.

Yet BP continues to minimize and cover up the dimensions of the spill, with CEO Tony Hayward this weekend declaring that the massive plumes of hydrocarbons discovered by multiple teams of scientists were nonexistent. He provided no evidence, but said that government scientists agree with him. There are no plumes, Hayward said, because oil has a “specific density” less than water and therefore must rise to the surface.

This brought sharp responses from scientists and environmentalist groups. Suckling told the WWS he found Hayward's position “shocking.” “He apparently is not aware of the intended effect these highly toxic dispersants have on the oil,” Suckling said. “The whole purpose of that dispersant is to distribute the oil in the water. The fact that he doesn't seem to understand that is very disturbing.”

Dr. Safina said the plumes were the logical result of the dispersant fired at the oil as it escapes the riser at the ocean floor. “I would certainly not take BP's word over the scientists,” he added.

Billy Nungesser, president of Plaquemines Parish, was more colorful in his response to Hayward, as quoted by the Associated Press. “We ought to take him offshore and dunk him 10 feet underwater and pull him up and ask him ‘What's that all over your face?’” Nungesser said.



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