

Scientists increase flow rate estimate

Oil spill reaches Alabama, Florida inland waterway

David Walsh
11 June 2010

Oil continues to gush from the spill in the Gulf of Mexico at the rate of tens of thousands of barrels a day. At least 50 to 75 million gallons of crude oil, and perhaps far more, along with vast quantities of toxic dispersant, have poured into the sea over the course of seven weeks, poisoning the environment and damaging the livelihoods of tens of thousands of people. There is no end in sight to the nightmare.

A government panel, the Flow Rate Technical Group, released new consensus estimates on Thursday of 25,000 to 30,000 barrels a day over the past seven weeks, with some projecting a rate of up to 40,000 barrels (1.68 million gallons). This is far higher than the rate given by BP and the Obama administration.

The estimates are based on data collected prior to the recent move by BP to cut the well pipe. Dr. Ira Leifer, a researcher in the Marine Science Institute at the University of California and a member of the FRTG, has argued that this action may have increased the surge of oil not by 20 percent, as the White House had warned might happen, but several times over, to as much as 100,000 barrels (or 4.2 million gallons) a day, BP's "worst case scenario."

Obama administration officials meanwhile continue to downplay the ongoing disaster, in an effort to protect BP and the multi-billion dollar industry as a whole.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar told a US Senate committee Wednesday that the "rate of increase may have been somewhere between 4 and 5 percent of what it was before." Salazar provided no evidence for this claim, which is as credible as every other estimate provided so far by BP and the federal government.

BP announced Thursday that since its drill ship on the scene is only capable of siphoning 756,000 gallons of oil per day through the containment cap currently installed, it will begin burning oil and gas at sea. Kent Wells, the oil firm's senior vice president of exploration and production, told the Associated Press, "A semi-submersible drilling rig should be

set up early next week to capture and burn about 420,000 gallons of oil daily. Once on board, the oil and gas collected from the well will be sent down a boom and burned at sea. Wells says testing will begin this weekend."

What the consequences might be of burning millions of gallons of oil and gas at sea no one at BP or in the federal government cared to discuss.

Scientists are concerned that the 4.3 million liters of dispersant already pumped and sprayed into the Gulf of Mexico may have far-reaching implications, and may have helped create giant plumes of oil deep below the surface.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration acknowledged Tuesday the presence of oil in samples taken as far as 5,000 meters below the surface and 50 miles from the disaster site.

Calculations as to the ultimate impact of using the dispersant, Corexit, are complicated by the fact that thanks to profit interests, its full formula is a company secret! The *Financial Times* reported Wednesday, "For competitive reasons, details are given only to those who sign a non-disclosure agreement with Nalco," the manufacturer.

The *Times* quoted Gregor Eberli, a professor of marine geology at the University of Miami: "It is astounding that the exact chemical composition of Corexit is not publicly available, given the magnitude of this disaster. I don't understand why there hasn't been more pressure on the companies to disclose it."

The oil spill is already devastating the Gulf Coast. Local reports provide some idea of the spill's impact.

Oil has now moved into Alabama's inland waterway along the Gulf, polluting popular beaches and damaging fishing.

Alabama's *Mobile Press Register* reports: "From shrimp nets in the Mississippi Sound to the back bays and bayous around Orange Beach [Alabama], brown globs of oil stained previously pristine areas Wednesday. And more oil is likely on the way."

The newspaper continued: "On the other end of

Alabama's coastline, the Alabama Marine Resources Division officials found oil on their net at seven of eight locations while sampling the size of brown shrimp in Mississippi Sound, said supervising marine biologist John Mareska....

"With oil confirmed at so many locations in Mississippi Sound, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Commissioner Barnett Lawley said that he likely will be forced to close the area to fishing. 'I hate like hell to close it,' Lawley said, 'but the probability is extremely high.'"

Across the border in northwestern Florida, state officials are reporting heavier concentrations of oil that "have begun sloshing up" on the seashore. Tar balls and crude oil "mousse" appeared in the area late on Wednesday, "prompting state and local officials to step up skimming operations before the gooey mess taints delicate spawning areas. A variety of fish spawn there, including red snapper, grouper and speckled trout, and Alabama's primary oyster beds are in the same area as well." (Reuters)

Officials also report "breakdowns in communications" between local bodies, government officials and the so-called "Unified Command Center," which includes BP, Transocean and federal agencies, headquartered in Mobile, Alabama.

BP is not only stonewalling on providing information, it is doing everything in its power to slow down and limit the process of compensating those whose lives or businesses have been affected by the spill.

At a hearing at the state capitol in Baton Rouge Wednesday, Louisiana local officials expressed numerous grievances with the response of BP and the government to the economic and ecological disaster. Officials, the *Times-Picayune* reported, "described a lack of federally approved plans to protect coastal resources, a BP damage claims process that is moving slowly and secretively, insufficient assessments of seafood contamination, an underfinanced state legal strategy and a choking of parish initiatives because of shortages of equipment and cash."

Louisiana's coastal restoration chief, Garret Graves, explained at the hearing that the state had presented a defense plan to BP and the US Coast Guard in early May but had still not received a response. "We still don't have a plan from BP and the Coast Guard on how they're going to protect our resources," Graves declared.

Curt Eysink, executive director of the Louisiana Workforce Commission, noted that his agency is anticipating a sharp increase in unemployment compensation because of the economic disruption, but that "BP is holding back vital information about its emergency hiring practices and claims processing for those out of work."

Furthermore, *Times-Picayune*, to the commented that the process of documenting claims against BP by individuals or businesses is onerous "and gets harder with each new round of claims."

The Louisiana official asserted that BP had made only 21 payments of more than \$5,000 to state residents or businesses, some of which are closing in the meantime. "It's reasonable to assume that \$5,000 payments are not going to do it for those businesses," he said.

Kristy Nichols, secretary of the Louisiana Department of Social Services, said she and other officials are detecting a growing "public health emergency" for families in the state and "are trying to track the impact, which includes mental health, health-care coverage, food stamp assistance, jobless claims and Medicaid applications." (*Times-Picayune*)

The amounts paid out by BP so far are paltry in comparison to the hundreds of millions of dollars in damages suffered by residents. In Alabama and Mississippi, for example, BP has reportedly paid \$14.4 million to settle some 11,600 claims, an average of approximately \$1,240 a claim.

While a BP representative showed up to the Baton Rouge hearing to answer questions, the company snubbed a hearing on the scope of the oil spill at the Mississippi state legislature on Tuesday. Legislators received a letter instead, informing them no BP representative would be able to attend and suggesting an alternative date.

Florida State Meteorologist Amy Godsey reported Wednesday, according to Reuters, that Gulf of Mexico currents have changed, making it more likely that the oil spill will work its way into the Straits of Florida. "Oceanographers say it now seems likely that oil from the spill will enter the Straits. They say if that occurs, oil would be carried by the Gulf Stream along Florida's heavily populated Atlantic coast and then further up the US eastern seaboard."

Ominously, Godsey also reminded a task force Wednesday that tropical waves were forming off the coast of Africa and the Yucatan Peninsula. "It's day nine of hurricane season, and there's some tropical waves out there, guys," she reportedly said. "We've got the train going."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact