

BP abruptly suspends testing on new well cap

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Tests of the new capping system placed over the runaway Macondo oil well in the Gulf of Mexico intended to take place on Tuesday were suspended by BP until late on Wednesday. National Incident Commander Thad Allen announced the delay after discussion with US Energy Secretary Stephen Chu and BP executives.

No details of the meeting or the concerns that led to the decision to delay testing were revealed. "As a result of these discussions, we decided that the process may benefit from additional analysis," Allen said, offering no further explanation.

Whatever the precise reason for the latest delay in controlling the gusher, the one thing that is certain is that the public is being lied to. This is in keeping with a pattern established in the immediate aftermath of the April 20 blowout, when both BP and the Obama administration insisted that there was no oil spill.

BP placed the "capping stack," a 40-foot tall, 150,000 pound mechanism which contains three sealing valves, over the leaking well on Monday. The well cannot be sealed until the necessary tests have been performed to determine the safety of such a procedure. The tests consist of shutting the valves for a period of up to 48 hours during which time BP would measure the amount of pressure in the system.

If the pressure in the system is too high, it could create the potential for a blowout and an even greater gush of oil into the Gulf. If, on the other hand, the pressure is found to be too low, it would suggest a breach in the well casing extending far beneath the seabed. In this case, neither the cap nor the relief wells long promised to be the sure solution to the crisis would be sufficient to contain the blowout.

In addition to the delay in testing, BP also suspended drilling of its relief wells on Wednesday for up to 48 hours. In a statement, BP executive Kent Wells said, "We want to move forward with this as soon as we are

ready for it. But we don't want to move forward with inconclusive results. We need to make sure this is right. As much as we want to do things as soon as possible, we want to make sure they are absolutely correct."

Wells' cautious tone is a significant change from that adopted during his appearance on Monday before the first public hearing of the presidential commission appointed to investigate the oil spill, where he confidently laid out the plans for bringing a halt to the crisis. Commission members did not challenge Wells' testimony.

As to what precisely is happening with the Macondo well, and the real reasons tests have been delayed, it is impossible to say for certain. Both BP and the representatives of the National Incident Command have deliberately worked to keep the public in the dark. No justification or explanation for any decisions or setbacks have been given. Data collected on the scene remains under the control of BP, which has consistently prevented independent scientists from examining it. In the 86 days of the crisis each new plan devised by BP to halt the flow of oil from the ocean's floor has failed after confident assurances of success.

The primary concern in every decision made by BP from the beginning of the Deepwater Horizon disaster has been its own bottom line and how best to protect itself from prosecution and financial liabilities. There is no reason to take anything either BP or the Obama administration says at face value.



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