BP begins two-day pressure test of new capping device

Possible damage to well casing

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16 July 2010

After two days of delay, BP on Tuesday afternoon began its 48-hour pressure test to determine whether or not the erupting Macondo well can withstand a new capping system, which it is hoped will stop oil from entering the Gulf of Mexico until two relief wells can permanently seal off the largest spill in history.

The pressure test required the complete closing off of the oil gushing from vents on the side of the new capping system, leading to claims that no more oil is entering the Gulf. But both BP and the White House downplayed expectations.

"Although it cannot be assured, it is expected that no oil will be released to the ocean during the test," BP said in a cautious statement. "Even if no oil is released during the test, this will not be an indication that oil and gas flow from the wellbore has been permanently stopped."

The closing off of the well aims to supply engineers with a pressure reading. If pressure is high enough, BP could determine to close the well through the new capping system. If, on the other hand, pressure in the well is too low, it would indicate that the well itself might be leaking somewhere below the ocean floor in its 13,000-foot length. BP may then open the cap and return to siphoning operations.

Significantly, when the "top kill" attempt to smother the gusher with mud failed in May, Coast Guard Commander Thad Allen claimed that well pressure never surpassed 6,000 pounds per square inch (PSI) in the rig's failed blowout preventer. Yet now for the well to be declared structurally sound, BP has indicated that a PSI reading of at least 8,000 PSI is desired.

According to an Associated Press report, after two days of tests the cap will be reopened while engineers "decide what to do."

The two-day delay in the test was reportedly first caused by alarm among scientists over risks the test itself might pose to the well. Scientists "are concerned that a spike in pressure as the flow is clamped could blow oil and gas out of the casing of the well and into the geological formations," according to the *Washington Post*. "Throughout the crisis, engineers have feared the possibility that efforts to fix the problem could make it worse."

"There is a potential that other parts of the well have failed, or may fail, as pressures increase in the well due to the cap," Jonathan Parry of Global Gas Supply told the *Financial Times*. "By capping the well the oil will go to the path of least resistance. You could have an external blowout where a large amount of earth is literally blown out by the oil. That would be far worse than the current spill, as it could be thousands of feet below the mudline and very difficult to contain."

On the basis of the information released so far by BP, it is impossible to tell whether or not the cap has in fact further damaged the well casing.

In spite of the uncertainty over what may be happening beneath the ocean's surface, BP vice president Kent Wells claimed that no more oil is being added to the worst environmental catastrophe in US history. "I am very pleased that there's no oil going into the Gulf of Mexico," Wells said on Tuesday. "In fact, I'm really excited there's no oil going into the Gulf of Mexico."

There is no reason to accept his claims in the absence of independent analysis. The nearly two months since the April 20 explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig, which killed 11 workers, has been a virtually

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unbroken chain of lies, cover-up, and censorship. In the interim, somewhere between 92 million and 327 million gallons of oil have been spilled into the Gulf of Mexico, according to a range of estimates compiled by PBS.

There are also a number of unanswered questions about the capping and testing operation itself that suggest that far more is taking place in the depths of the Gulf than is being revealed.

Why was the new capping and testing launched only in recent weeks? If it is as effective as BP claims it can be in stopping the gusher, why was it not begun sooner? And why has there been a temporary halt to the drilling of relief wells—one of them now only four feet from the Macondo—which until the capping and testing operation were presented as the only means of stopping the blowout?

These questions cannot be definitively answered because BP, with the backing of the Obama administration, exercises a dictatorship over the spill response, denying independent scientific and media analysis and placing a gag order over its own scientists and engineers. Whatever the precise answers, it is certain that the public is denied critical information.

It is worth recalling the series of propaganda events orchestrated by the Obama administration in mid-June to create what top White House advisor David Axlerod called an “inflection point” in the narrative of the disaster. In rapid-fire succession, Obama visited the Gulf Coast for two days, gave a nationally televised Oval Office speech on the blowout, met with BP CEO Tony Hayward and Chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg to establish a $20 billion “independent” claims facility, and then put Hayward before a hearing of the House Energy Committee to answer “tough questions.”

The central purpose of that week’s events—beyond protecting BP’s share values—was to prepare the public to accept that the gusher would continue for many weeks. After repeated failures, there would be no new effort to stop the runaway well. The only solution, it was repeatedly declared, would be the arrival of two relief wells scheduled for mid-August at the earliest.

Two weeks ago, BP announced that the relief wells had made more rapid progress than predicted, broaching the possibility that one of the two could make contact by the end of July. Then suddenly, the relief well drilling was stopped and the new testing and capping operation begun.

It is impossible to say with certainty why these decisions were made. But the abruptness of the change may have to do with concerns over the structural integrity of the well. If the well casing is already damaged, then the relief wells may not work or could experience a blowout from escaping gas from the main well. This raises the possibility that the method of last resort—the relief wells—may themselves fail to stop the eruption of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.

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