

Seepage found near BP's capped Macondo well

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Seepage has been found at the ocean floor near BP's Macondo well, which was fully capped last Tuesday as part of what was originally billed as a 48-hour pressure test. The report raises fears that the well casing itself, which descends 13,000 feet below the seabed of the Gulf of Mexico, has been compromised or even ruptured.

A government official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told the Associated Press that a seep as well as methane emissions were found on the ocean floor near the well. The official would not confirm whether the seepage was crude oil.

If so, that might also explain why pressure readings in the well have failed to clear 6,800 pounds per square inch (PSI). When the pressure tests began, former US Coast Guard Commander Thad Allen, the titular head of the joint federal-BP spill response, said that the test would seek to establish a minimum of 7,500 PSI. Earlier BP had said a PSI reading of 8,000 was desirable.

Nonetheless, over the past two days BP spokesmen have repeatedly claimed that there is no evidence of a leak. It was even broached as a possible explanation for the low pressure readings that the oil reservoir might have lost significant pressure due to the mammoth gusher that has emitted upwards of 200 million gallons of oil into the Gulf since April 20.

Originally it was stated that the cap was to have been removed after 48 hours, regardless of the pressure reading, while a decision was taken on whether to attempt to permanently cap the Macondo while relief wells are being completed, or else return to siphoning operations that were taking a share of the oil to ships on the Gulf's surface one mile above.

According to the AP, a rift has opened between the government and the BP over how to respond to the low

pressure reading and the evidence of oil emerging from the seafloor, with BP reportedly taking the position that the cap should remain in place. The anonymous government source also told the AP that BP refuses to comply with a government order for further monitoring.

"No one associated with this whole activity ... wants to see any more oil flow into the Gulf of Mexico," said BP chief operating officer Doug Suttles on Sunday. "Right now we don't have a target to return the well to flow."

This seems to contradict "[t]he concern all along," according to the AP's Colleen Long and Harry Weber, which centered on fears of "a leak elsewhere in the wellbore, meaning the cap may have to be reopened to prevent the environmental disaster from becoming even worse and harder to fix."

The possibility that there is oil seeping from the seafloor and the reported dispute between BP and the federal government raises a number of troubling questions. Is the spill far worse than it is even now currently understood to be? Why does capping continue even though PSI readings are not what was declared to be the necessary minimum prior to the operation? Will BP's insistence to continue with the new capping device exacerbate whatever damage has already been done to the the wellbore? If oil is gushing up from the seafloor, will relief wells be abandoned and the catastrophe extended indefinitely?

There are other unanswered questions. Until two weeks ago, the drilling of the relief wells was presented as the only possible solution to the disaster. But then, abruptly, BP stopped drilling the wells, even though one was only four feet from the Macondo, and the capping and testing operation was begun, even though engineers warned it posed major risks to the integrity of

the well. Why was this decision taken?

Since neither BP nor the Obama administration have allowed independent monitoring of the disaster or the recent test, it is impossible for the public to know what is taking place. The one thing that is certain is that the American people are being lied to, as has been the case since April 20, when the blowout on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig killed 11 workers.

From the beginning, the overriding aim in the response to the disaster by the government and BP has been to defend the company's financial well-being, a motivation that the AP hints at in its report on the alleged dispute between the government and the oil giant.

“While neither [Allen] nor BP officials could explain the apparent contradiction in plans,” the article notes, “Suttles’ comments carved out an important piece of turf for BP: If Allen sticks with the containment plan and oil again pours forth into the Gulf, even briefly, it will be the government’s doing, not BP’s.

“The company very much wants to avoid a repeat of the live underwater video that showed millions of gallons of oil spewing from the blown well for weeks. ‘I can see why they’re pushing for keeping the cap on and shut in until the relief well is in place,’ said Daniel Keeney, president of a Dallas-based public relations firm.”



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