

Hurricane Alex sends oil onto shores of Gulf states

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Strong winds and twelve-foot waves sent oil onto the shores of the Gulf Coast states and shut down cleanup operations on Wednesday as Hurricane Alex passed through the Gulf of Mexico. The category one hurricane avoided a direct hit with the spill area but the harsh weather conditions which accompanied it have presented new threats to the environment and spill workers.

Cleanup ships were forced back to shore by the weather and all skimming and booming efforts ground to a halt off the coasts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida. Twenty-eight oil platforms and 51 drilling rigs in the Gulf were also evacuated as a result of the storms.

In a press conference on the suspension of cleanup efforts, National Incident Commander Thad Allen told reporters, “The big focus of our operations right now would be on water skimming, trying to deal with the oil off shore as much as we can,” but, he added, “you can’t get more than three to five feet [waves] and you start having not very good results with skimming and booming.” Similar conditions are expected through Thursday as Hurricane Alex is predicted to strengthen and make landfall near the Texas-Mexico border.

While the storm did not force a suspension of oil collection at the site of the Deepwater Horizon wellhead, it did delay efforts to supplement containment efforts with a new system that BP claims could double the amount of oil collected each day. The third containment ship deployed to the site, the Helix Producer, has been unable to connect to the well due to rough seas caused by Hurricane Alex. The ship cannot be safely connected to collection systems until the size of the waves in the area decrease to between three and five feet.

As cleanup efforts have temporarily stalled, storms

continue to push oil inland. Florida’s Pensacola beach and Perdido Key are suffering greater contamination because of strong winds and high tides. “Forty to 50 percent of the beaches at Perdido Key from Johnson Beach to the Alabama state line have tar ball coverage,” the *Pensacola News Journal* reported. “Pensacola Beach is experiencing about 20 percent coverage of tar balls and tar patties with reports of a moderate odor of oil.”

The Associated Press reports tar balls “the size of apples” on the beaches of Louisiana’s Elmer’s Island. The storms wiped out the progress made by cleanup workers in the area during the previous weeks, covering beaches that had been targeted by cleanup workers with oil once again. Oil containment booms were thrown out of position and cannot be replaced until weather conditions improve.

In Alabama, an ABC news affiliate reported on the contamination of Orange Beach caused by Hurricane Alex. “Long stretches of beach were stained brown from tar balls and crude oil as far as 60 yards from the edge of the water,” it reported. “Oil deposits appeared worse than in past days, and local officials feared the temporary halt to skimming operations near the coast would only make matters worse as tourists come to the beach for the July 4 holiday.”

Wednesday also brought reports of tar balls washing up on the Texas coast for the first time since the beginning of the disaster. The tar balls are said to be undergoing tests to confirm whether or not they are connected to the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

While Hurricane Alex has caused delays in cleanup efforts and has contributed to the spread of oil onto the shores of Gulf Coast states, it has been revealed that BP’s emergency plan for dealing with an oil spill in the Gulf did not even take hurricanes into account. A

search of BP's 582-page document entitled "Gulf of Mexico Regional Oil Spill Response Plan" finds no instances of the words "hurricane" or "tropical storm."

With no contingency plan in place to counter the effects of hurricane weather, even greater complications can be expected in the coming weeks and months. June 1 marked the official beginning of what scientists expect to be a particularly strong hurricane season. The National Weather Service forecasts an 85 percent chance that the 2010 season will be "above normal."



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