

# BP oil disaster at 75 days

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For 75 days now, crude oil has been gushing into the Gulf of Mexico from the wreck of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig. While BP and the US government have done everything possible to downplay and obscure the amount of oil that has spilled out, estimates range as high as 150,000,000 to 200,000,000 gallons. The consequences will be incalculable.

The BP spill is one of the worst ecological catastrophes in history, and yet now it barely makes the front pages of the newspapers in the US or rates prominent coverage on television news programs. There is a natural nervousness in the media and the political establishment, as the ongoing horror story indicts a huge conglomerate and the political interests in Washington that protect it.

It seems clear that the announcement June 16 that BP would create a \$20 billion fund, followed the next day by Chief Executive Tony Hayward's appearance before Congress, was meant to signal the end of the officially-sponsored chastisement of the company, and the US media has responded accordingly. As Reuters commented July 1: "The British energy giant drew harsh criticism earlier in the crisis, but some of the political heat has cooled since President Barack Obama pressured the company to set up a \$20 billion fund for damages and lawmakers hammered BP executives at congressional hearings."

The fund, in fact, would cover only a fraction of the eventual cost of the spill, and Kenneth Feinberg, appointed by the Obama administration to oversee the \$20 billion, has made clear his intention to severely limit eligibility. The *Miami Herald* reports that when it comes to compensation, business owners and others continue to complain that BP is "nickel and diming" them.

In regard to the impact of the spill on the human population and on wildlife in the region, the news simply gets worse and worse.

- The proximity of Hurricane Alex slowed down or suspended clean-up operations in the Gulf of Mexico. Hundreds of oil skimmers were docked and were expected to remain so on Friday. The Coast Guard's Admiral Thad Allen noted, "The seas that were over 5 feet hindered the effectiveness of most boats used to scoop oil. All but the largest boats will likely be idled until this weekend."

The storm has also delayed by about six days the hookup of another containment vessel, which is eventually expected to be

capable of capturing about 20,000 to 25,000 barrels of oil a day.

As a result of the winds and waves, and the suspension of skimming operations, oil washed unimpeded onto the shore and into marshlands along the Gulf the past several days. Craig Taffaro, the president of St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana commented to the press, "We had to stand down because of the storm activity. Now that oil has been spewed all over the Chandelier Islands, we are going out again to start cleaning it up. We have to go back out, basically start over."

The storm "has brought in oil, unfortunately, from the panhandle of Florida to Louisiana, right now, at a higher rate than it has been over the last few days," Robert Dudley, chief of BP's Gulf Coast restoration effort, told PBS in an interview.

On Wednesday, Mississippi state officials closed more of the state's territorial waters to commercial and recreational fishing, including all species of finfish, crabs, shrimp and oysters. Some 240 pounds of tar balls and patties were collected on beaches the day before.

- Oil was found this week on seven of Mississippi's busiest beaches, forcing tourists to evacuate the shore. The Fourth of July weekend is one of the busiest weekends for Gulf Coast tourism in the calendar year.

National Public Radio notes, "The oil spill has all but destroyed the tourist trade from Louisiana to the Florida Panhandle." A manager of 2,100 condos in Gulf Shores, Alabama, told NPR that the holiday weekend was looking bleak. His condos had a 40 percent occupancy rate, "and I think we're very fortunate to have that." Normally, the company's condos are 98 percent full at this time of year.

Hurricane Alex brought heavy rain and strong winds to Florida's Panhandle beaches, pushing oil and tar ashore. Pensacola Beach was "oil-fouled," as the storm brought in "plate-sized" tar lumps. According to the Escambia County authorities, Pensacola Beach "reported coverage of up to 30 percent in some areas in tar balls and tar patties."

Pensacola officials issued a health advisory June 23 closing the beach, and rescinded it two days later. Subsequently, some 400 people have sought medical care for upper or lower respiratory problems, headaches, nausea, and eye irritation after trips to the county's beaches, says health department director Dr. John Lanza.

The Louisiana Health Department reports that 108 workers have become ill from working on the oil spill. The *Christian Science Monitor* reports, “The health effects of the oil and chemical dispersants used in the cleanup have become a major issue in the Gulf oil spill. Many cleanup workers are bused in from low-income urban areas, including from Anniston, Ala. A BP contractor told a *Monitor* reporter at a dock in Bon Secour, Ala., on June 25, ‘Don’t ask the workers any questions.’”

The newspaper ran a story June 26, whose headline asked “Gulf oil spill: Could ‘toxic storm’ make beach towns uninhabitable?” which raised the possibility that “In the case of a hurricane hitting the 250-mile wide slick and pushing it over sand dunes and into beach towns, residents fear they’ll face not only mass evacuations, but potential permanent relocation.”

Approximately 428 miles of Gulf Coast shoreline are “currently oiled.” This includes 71 miles in Florida, 259 miles in Louisiana, 52 miles in Mississippi and 46 miles in Alabama.

- Numerous scientists have begun to warn about the impact of the methane being released into the ocean. According to John Kessler, a Texas A&M University oceanographer, the oil emanating from the Deepwater Horizon well contains about 40 percent methane. “This is the most vigorous methane eruption in modern human history,” Kessler told the media last week.

Back from a 10-day research trip in the Gulf, Kessler observed, “There is an incredible amount of methane in there.” In some areas, “We saw [methane levels] approach a million times above background concentrations.”

The vast quantities of methane run the risk of suffocating marine life and creating “dead zones,” where the oxygen is so depleted as to make life impossible.

A marine biologist at Duke University, Larry Crowder, told reporters that there were already signs that fish were being driven from their habitat. “The animals are already voting with their fins to get away from where the oil spill is and where potentially there is oxygen depletion,” he asserted. “When you begin to see animals changing their distribution that is telling you about the quality of water further offshore. Basically, the fish are moving closer to shore to try to get to better water.”

“A parallel would be: Why are the wildlife running to the edge of a forest fire? There will be a lot of fish, sharks, and turtles trying to get out of this water they detect is unsuitable,” Crowder commented.

And Samantha Joye, of the Department of Marine Sciences at the University of Georgia, told a teleconference, according to the *Guardian*, that “her preliminary findings suggested the high volume of methane coming out of the well could upset the ocean food chain. Such high concentrations, it is feared, would trigger the growth of microbes, which break up the methane, but also gobble up oxygen needed by marine life to survive, driving out other living things.”

She told the media, “That water can go completely anoxic [a state of extremely low oxygen] and that is a pretty serious situation for any oxygen-requiring organism. We haven’t seen

zero-oxygen water, but there is certainly enough gas in the water to draw oxygen down to zero.”

A team of scientists from the University of California Irvine has detected serious air pollution over the Gulf of Mexico. The *Los Angeles Times* reports that the team, “including Nobel laureate F. Sherwood Rowland and Chemistry department Chairman Donald Blake, has detected concentrations of toxic chemicals such as alkyl nitrates, methane, hexane and butane compounds that can irritate or burn skin and eyes or cause dizziness, according to studies. ... [T]he concentrations are higher than those found over heavily polluted urban areas, such as Los Angeles, Mexico City or Oklahoma oil tank farms.”

- Public outrage over the spill has grown steadily, although it finds little or no expression in the media and in Washington, whose leading figures are naturally sympathetic to the “plight” of BP. A recent opinion poll found that less than one in four voters think the federal government (24 percent) and BP (23 percent) are doing everything they can to combat the oil spill. Only 19 percent approve of BP’s conduct during the oil spill.

The anger and frustration are taking their toll in the region, as Gulf Coast residents see their jobs, beaches and wildlife under systematic attack. The Associated Press reports, “Psychiatrists who treated people after Katrina and have held group sessions in oil spill-stricken areas say the symptoms showing up are much the same: Anger. Anxiety. Drinking. Depression. Suicidal thoughts. ...

“This is a second round of major trauma for children and families still recovering from Katrina. It represents uncharted territory,” said Dr. Irwin Redlener, director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University who has worked with Katrina survivors.

The Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals Secretary Alan Levine wrote a second letter June 28 requesting BP to pay \$10 million “to help mitigate the behavioral health impacts of the spill on affected individuals and families.” Levine pointed out that his department’s counseling teams “have already engaged and counseled almost 2,000 individuals in the affected areas, and are reporting palpable increases in anxiety, depression, stress, grief, excessive drinking, earlier drinking and suicide ideation.”

He added, “These are early warning signs of developing substance abuse and dependence, mental illness, suicide and familial breakdown including divorce, spouse abuse, and child abuse and neglect. The effects of parental stress, anger, anxiety, substance abuse and mental illness are especially insidious on children.”



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