

While BP replaces cap on well, millions of gallons of oil flow into Gulf

David Walsh
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Oil giant BP began replacing a cap over its leaking well in the Gulf of Mexico Saturday, aimed at creating a tighter seal and containing the spill. Crude oil and gas have been gushing into the Gulf for nearly three months. Some 150 to 200 million gallons have now poured into the sea, destroying marine life, soiling beaches, polluting marshland and inner waterways, shutting down entire industries and devastating tourism, and putting thousands out of work.

BP, criminally responsible for the disaster, has been left in charge of cleanup and containment, with the complicity of the US government. The operation has been conducted entirely according to the oil giant's profit interests.

Now, 85 days into the spill, the company claims it might be able to collect the vast majority of the escaping oil within a matter of days. In the meantime, oil is flowing virtually freely and an additional 5 million gallons may leak into the Gulf of Mexico before the new containment system is in place. "Because the...cap must be removed to conduct this sealing cap operation, there will be a period of decreased oil and gas capture from the wellhead," the oil firm acknowledged in a statement. The *Washington Post* referred to this as taking one step back "in order to take two steps forward."

Live video showed the cap being removed. Noted the *New York Times*, "As the cap was moved away, oil gushed anew from the well."

The risks involved, including the fact of an undetermined number of days with no cap on the well, obliged BP to apply to the National Incident Commander, the Coast Guard's Thad Allen, for permission to proceed. Allen gave the go-ahead, in part because of a stretch of good weather. In a statement July 9, Allen claimed, "I validated this plan because the

capacity for oil containment when these installations are complete will be far greater than the capabilities we have achieved using current systems."

On Saturday, robotic submarines removed the old cap, known as a lower marine riser package (LMRP), which has been in place since early June to capture the oil and send it to ships for processing. The new cap, according to the *New York Times*, comprises "two heavy-duty pieces of equipment that together are 30 feet high and weigh more than 100 tons," which "should eventually enable BP to collect all the oil from the well, estimated at up to 60,000 barrels a day."

The operation is a complicated one, taking place thousands of feet below the surface of the ocean. The US media is primed to celebrate the operation and proclaim it a success, hoping once and for all to get the story—a damning indictment of global capitalism—out of its headlines.

Given BP's pattern of greed, negligence, and incompetence, or what the US media politely terms its "poor track record," there is no reason to assume that containment is in the immediate offing.

A *Time* magazine commentator noted, "BP's underwater robots have managed to disconnect the LMRP cap—and as a result, thousands of barrels of oil that had been captured by the Enterprise are now flowing freely into the Gulf.... If something goes wrong—and a lot has gone wrong for BP in its efforts to stop the well's flow—we could easily end up worse off than when we began."

A hurricane of any significant size would force the ships to leave and allow the crude oil to spew again for as long as the storm lasts, or longer, since it takes time for the vessels to resume their positions and reconnect to the containment systems.

There are risks apparently involved in the procedure

that BP is currently undertaking. The Associated Press explained that the new cap, called a capping stack or Top Hat 10, “is designed to fully seal the leak and provide connections for new vessels on the surface to collect oil. The cap has valves that can restrict the flow of oil and shut it in, if it can withstand the enormous pressure.”

AP noted that this “enormous pressure” will be one of the key items for officials to monitor, according to Paul Bommer, a professor of petroleum engineering at the University of Texas at Austin. Bommer told the wire service in an e-mail Saturday, “If the new cap does work and they shut the well in, it is possible that part of the well could rupture if the pressure inside builds to an unacceptable value.”

The Obama administration remains a spectator, issuing vaguely optimistic statements about the disaster’s outcome. Adviser David Axelrod told ABC’s “This Week” that President Barack Obama was being briefed “multiple times a day” about the situation in the Gulf. As to the latest operation, Axelrod remarked, “We have every reason to believe that this will work.”

Gulf residents were more guarded in their comments to the media, as the *Washington Post* noted. They “reserved judgment about BP’s latest effort and said the damage already done to the environment, fishing and tourism will haunt the region for a long time either way.

“ ‘At this point, there have been so many ups and downs, disappointments, that everybody down here is like, “We’ll believe it when we see it,” ’ said Keith Kennedy, a charter boat captain in Venice, La.”

The administration and big business

While popular anger has steadily mounted, the political establishment and the media have systematically downplayed the BP crisis for weeks.

Axelrod and Attorney General Eric Holder, in interviews over the weekend, rejected criticisms that the present administration was unfriendly to business or had been too harsh to BP.

In response to comments from two big business

spokesmen, “voicing concerns about the Obama administration,” Axelrod asserted on ABC’s “This Week” that the administration had saved the financial system and that the profits of the banks and financial institutions were up “65 percent...over the last two years.”

On CBS’s “Face the Nation,” Holder responded to charges that his department should not have announced, in early June, that a criminal probe was being launched in connection to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

The *Washington Post*, for example, took the trouble to editorialize on the issue, commenting July 2 that Holder’s announcement “made front-page news and sent BP’s stock price tumbling.” To fishermen and hotel and restaurant workers in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida, the fate of BP’s stock and its big investors must be a pressing issue.

On CBS, Holder was defensive, claiming that “I was very careful in what I said when I did not say that BP was under investigation. What I did say was that we had opened a criminal investigation but did not indicate who the subject of the investigation was.... And that is a very serious thing because there are a variety of entities and a variety of people who are the subjects of that investigation. And for people to conclude that BP is the focus of this investigation might not be correct.”

There is no reason to believe that any BP executive, in fact, will ever face criminal charges. The announcement of the criminal probe was done purely for public relations reasons, to placate public anger.



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