

BP oil spill now worst ever in Gulf of Mexico

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The Deepwater Horizon oil spill is now the largest ever to strike the Gulf of Mexico, based on government estimates of the flow rate. As of Thursday, the spill surpassed the 1979 Ixtoc I disaster, in which 140 million gallons of oil were spilled into the Gulf when a Pemex well off the coast of Mexico suffered a blowout.

Using the high-end numbers of the latest government estimates, the Deepwater Horizon well has now sent 140.6 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. The number makes a mockery of the several false estimates of the spill amount used by both BP and the White House to cover up the disaster from the moment it began on April 20.

Efforts to clean up the massive amount of oil in the Gulf remained at a standstill on Thursday, as the harsh weather conditions accompanying Hurricane Alex have made work in the region impossible. Alex passed through the Gulf of Mexico on Wednesday, pushing oil onto the beaches of Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and Florida, knocking containment booms out of position and forcing skimmer ships back to shore. The hurricane made landfall near the Texas-Mexico border late Wednesday and early Thursday morning.

The center of the storm passed far from the Deepwater Horizon wellhead. Nevertheless, it caused a significant amount of damage to the beaches of the Gulf Coast states and “significantly hampered” cleanup operations, in the words of National Incident Commander Thad Allen. With an especially strong hurricane season predicted, the possibility that another hurricane making a direct hit at the spill site is high.

Allen spoke of the consequences of such a storm during a Wednesday press briefing, making clear that there has been little preparation for dealing with the impact of a hurricane. “We believe,” said Allen, “given the operations that are going on, on scene that we will need about 120 hours or 5 days to decouple, demobilize and then give 24 hours for those [containment] vessels

to proceed to a safe haven.”

Once the storm passes, Allen said, “We estimate that when they come back and redeploy, that entire time period if we were to have to abandon the site, go to a safe haven and come back, could be a total of 14 days.” During this two-week period, oil would flow freely into the Gulf waters. With the amount of hurricane activity forecast for the season, this process might have to be undertaken several times.

As cleanup workers wait for the weather to calm before they can return to work, new details are emerging of the conditions under which they work and live.

There are now reports that banned Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) trailers contaminated by formaldehyde are being used to house cleanup workers. The trailers were among the 120,000 used to provide emergency housing to victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. They were subsequently banned by the US government from ever being used again for housing purposes after the Center for Disease Control discovered they contained high levels of formaldehyde.

Rather than storing or destroying the toxic trailers, the US government sold them to the public at auctions with the provision that future owners of the trailers be informed that they could not be used for housing. However, several of the businesses contracted for Deepwater Horizon cleanup work have purchased the trailers and are using them to house their workers.

The *New York Times* interviewed Ron Mason, described as the “owner of a disaster contracting firm,” who said he had sold over 20 of the contaminated trailers to spill workers and businesses in Louisiana. Mason told the *Times*, with callous indifference to those now living in the contaminated housing, “These are perfectly good trailers. Look, you know that new car smell? Well, that’s formaldehyde, too. The stuff is

in everything. It's not a big deal.”

The National Cancer Institute reports that the short term health effects of exposure to formaldehyde include “burning sensations in the eyes, nose, and throat; coughing; wheezing; nausea; and skin irritation.” The International Agency for Research on Cancer has classified formaldehyde as a human carcinogen and prolonged exposure to the chemical has been linked to cases of leukemia or brain cancer in patients.



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