Oil spill reaches Texas and Lake Pontchartrain

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Laboratory analysis on Tuesday confirmed that tar balls found washed ashore on beaches in Galveston, Texas, over the weekend originated from the BP's Macondo well, which is gushing out millions of gallons of oil per day 50 miles southeast of Venice, Louisiana.

Oil has now washed ashore in all the Gulf states—Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida—in a 550-mile stretch, about equivalent to the length of Great Britain from its northern to southern tips.

Tar balls and oil sheen have also been discovered in Louisiana's Lake Pontchartrain, the estuary located directly to the north of New Orleans. Since the large saltwater lake is connected by only a thin strait to the Gulf, the arrival of the tar balls suggests that the oil and its toxic effects will increasingly penetrate into inland areas.

On Monday the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration expanded its ban on Gulf fishing to more than 81,000 square miles, about a third of all federal waters in the Gulf. The ban already includes most of the region's richest fishing areas, effectively shutting down one of the coast's largest industries.

BP's efforts to collect the oil, meanwhile, are floundering.

In its skimming operations, BP has been able to collect less than 1,000 barrels of oil per day by its own count. Yet in an environmental impact statement produced only one month before the April 20 blowout on the Deepwater Horizon, BP told the federal government that it would have the ability to skim and remove 491,721 barrels per day, the *Washington Post* reports.

Obama administration regulators did not question the estimate before approving BP's operations at the Macondo site. BP's daily collection average, 900 barrels, has been about two tenths of one percent of what the oil giant assured the federal government it could remove. In fact the total amount of oil skimmed in the 77 days of the disaster—67,143 barrels—is but 13 percent of what BP claimed prior to the blowout that it could remove in a single day.

BP and the Obama administration have sown confusion about the effectiveness of the skimming, reporting on Monday that 671,428 barrels had been skimmed. This would be an impressive figure, were it not the case that it was at least 90 percent seawater.

Skimming operations have been made ineffective in recent days by choppy waters, conditions which are expected to continue for the next week.

Walter, a skimming boat captain, told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters that skimming is ineffective. "We're barely doing anything. Out of 150 million gallons, we haven't picked up two million," he said. "They deliberately sunk all the oil to the bottom as a PR move. There just isn't much for us to skim."

John, a cleanup worker from Missouri, said that a six-man boat crew, working all day, sometimes can gather only fifteen gallons of oil. Dean Blanchard, a shrimper, has seen boats return after a day's work with only 4-5 gallons.

BP has burned a much larger share of the oil, 238,095 barrels in all, and it claims that 632,410 barrels have been recovered from siphoning operations at the wellhead. The burning of the oil has been harshly criticized over concerns about potential damage to human health caused by the resulting airborne pollutants.

But the largest amount by far has been lost into the deeper waters of the Gulf. At the high-end spill rate estimate, according to PBS, the blowout has produced 300 million gallons, or about 7,143,000 barrels. The

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low end in the range of official estimates, 87 million gallons or just over 2 million barrels, is simply not credible, given BP's claim that it has siphoned, burned, or skimmed about half of that amount.

With each passing day the social and ecological catastrophe caused by the spill worsens. The fishing and tourism industries have been all but shut down. The consequences to human health are only now beginning to come into focus, with hundreds or perhaps thousands of clean-up workers developing health problems from acute exposure to the toxic mix of oil and chemical dispersants. Entire species, some already endangered, now face annihilation.

Scientists have expressed fear that the Gulf region could reach an ecological tipping point where a substantial share of sea life will vanish from vast areas of what was once one of the most biologically rich zones in the Western Hemisphere.

Now a British team of scientists has warned that the oil disaster is likely to raise the level of arsenic in the sea water substantially.

Arsenic, a highly poisonous metallic element, occurs naturally in sea water. Normally it is deposited in sediment on the seafloor and covered up. However, oil seems to disrupt this natural settling process, and also carries substantial levels of arsenic itself. Fish and other organisms consume the arsenic, and it accumulates and concentrates as it moves its way up the food chain toward humans. In addition, arsenic can disrupt photosynthesis in simple marine plants and cause genetic defects in animals.

"Oil spills stop the normal process because the oil combines with sediment and it leads to an accumulation of arsenic in the water over time," said Professor Mark Sephton of Imperial College. "Our study is a timely reminder that oil spills could create a toxic ticking time bomb, which could threaten the fabric of the marine ecosystem in the future."

This week BP announced that it will proceed with high-risk oil exploration in spite of the Deepwater Horizon disaster. It made the declaration in response to opposition from a group of shareholders.

"The position is the same now as it was at the strategy update earlier in the year. We are committed to three core areas of deep-water oil, unconventional gas and enhanced recovery on super-sized fields," a spokesman said in London. "The world needs oil to meet growing demand and total risk aversion would just drive up prices."

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