Obama, BP seek new “turning point” with well-capping effort

Tom Eley
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BP began pressure testing today on a new cap it lowered over its erupting Macondo oil well, which has gushed somewhere between 150 million and 200 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico in the 85 days since the deadly blowout on its Deepwater Horizon rig.

The effort, which BP hopes will allow it to stop the gusher within days, comes in a week where the Obama administration and the oil giant have sought to create a “turning point,” as the *Wall Street Journal* put it, in public perception of the disaster. The administration’s toothless presidential commission on the blowout also began its hearings this week, and Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar put in place a revised “moratorium” on new deep sea drilling operations that would affect, at most, a small handful of rigs.

Meanwhile, new evidence emerged that BP is systematically cutting claims payments to spill victims and blocking many applications entirely. (See: “BP cuts benefits to victims of Gulf oil disaster”.)

Pressure tests will reveal whether or not the well can be closed down through a series of valves in the new cap, a 40-foot structure that has been lowered on top of the failed blowout preventer about one mile beneath the water’s surface. The tests were slated to last from between 6 and 48 hours.

If the pressure measured is too high, it could indicate that a new effort to cap the well would blow apart the old structure, exacerbating the gusher, which is already dumping at least 2 million gallons of oil a day into the Gulf.

There is also some risk that the pressure test itself could create new holes in the well casing. “Do I want to make that bet that there’s sufficient inherent strength in that well path to keep that well contained?” an anonymous technician working on the project told the *New York Times*. “Why would we take that chance?” (BP employees working in cleanup and containment operations are not allowed to speak to the media.)

Conversely, if the pressure readings are too low, this may indicate that the well itself, which descends 13,000 feet below the ocean floor, has been structurally compromised by the blowout and that oil is gushing not just from the wellhead, but into the rocks and seafloor adjacent the well. If so, there will be no way to cap the well in the short-term, and it could make impossible the attempts to drill relief wells. In other words, this worst-case-scenario could very well mean that the Macondo would dump oil into the Gulf until its reserves are depleted.

If either the pressure reading indicates major problems or the test itself backfires, BP would resume siphoning operations from the wellhead to ships on the surface, which currently have a capacity to receive 33,000 barrels a day. BP has said it will increase receiving capacity to 60,000 barrels per day by the end of the month. Neither BP nor the Obama administration has explained why greater receiving capacity cannot be put in place sooner.

As for why the pressure reading test was not conducted earlier when efforts to place caps on the well failed, BP claims that the gauges for the procedure were not available.

Whatever the results of the tests, the new attempt to cap the well will be seized on by BP and the Obama administration as another effort to defuse anger over the worst environmental catastrophe in North American history and “move on.”

These efforts were tied to two other events organized this week by the Obama administration, entirely for public consumption.

On Tuesday, Ken Salazar, the secretary of the

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Department of the Interior, put in place a revised moratorium on new deep-sea drilling projects in the Gulf of Mexico after a court struck down an earlier moratorium on June 20.

The new moratorium, which would expire on November 30, is even less restrictive than the last, which stopped operations on only 21 rigs in the Gulf. Salazar will require "the submission of evidence by operators demonstrating that they have the ability to respond effectively to a potential oil spill in the Gulf," according to a Department of the Interior statement, as well as "the assessment of wild well intervention and blowout containment resources" and "the collection and analysis of key evidence regarding the potential causes of the April 20, 2010 explosion and sinking of the Deepwater Horizon."

In other words, the industry will be allowed to self-regulate, as has been its practice for years. There are no fundamental changes in industry practice outlined. Once the "moratorium" expires, deep-sea drilling operations will resume largely as before.

When it lifts the moratorium on November 30, the Department of the Interior will lean on the findings of the presidential commission formed to investigate the disaster and issue recommendations, formally known as the "National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling," which began hearings in New Orleans on Monday. The committee is co-chaired by William K. Reilly, who headed the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under George H. W. Bush and now sits on the board of directors of oil major ConocoPhillips, and Bob Graham, a former Democratic senator and governor of Florida and a long-standing advocate of deregulation.

Its central task is not to objectively evaluate the causes of the Deepwater Horizon disaster, but to give deep sea oil drilling a clean bill of health, as Obama indicated when he established the commission in early June. "Only [after the investigation] can we be assured that deepwater drilling can take place safely," Obama said. "Only then can we accept further development of these resources… Only then can we be confident that we've done what's necessary to prevent history from repeating itself."

After only two days of testimony, the commission has left little doubt that its hearings are nothing more than a public relations operation. On Monday, commission members presented no challenging questions to BP executive Kent Wells or Coast Guard Admiral Peter Neffenger. Much of Tuesday's hearings were given over to demands from the oil industry and their political assets like Louisiana's Democratic senator Mary Landrieu that Obama lift even the revised "moratorium" on deep-sea drilling.

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