

Gulf disaster largest oil spill ever

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The BP Gulf disaster is the worst ocean oil spill in world history, according to new data compiled by a team of government-sponsored scientists.

On Monday the National Incident Command's Flow Rate Technical Group (FRTG) announced that the BP Macondo well blowout dumped between 53,000 barrels (2,226,000 gallons) and 62,000 barrels (over 2,600,000 gallons) of oil per day into the Gulf of Mexico during the nearly three months in which the well was out of control.

In all the group estimates 206 million gallons of oil, 4.9 million barrels, gushed into the Gulf, far more than the 3.3 million barrels spilled into the Bay of Campeche in the Ixtoc rig blowout of 1979. It is twenty times the volume of the previous-worst US spill, the Exxon Valdez tanker disaster in Alaska's remote Prince William Sound in 1989.

By its own estimate BP captured only 800,000 barrels of this total, around 16 percent. While some of the oil has evaporated or has been broken down by simple organisms, scientists believe that the vast majority of the remaining 4.1 million barrels are lost in the Gulf, either in the slick on its surface, as tiny particles below the surface, settled in the sediment on the seabed, or washed ashore on coastal beaches and marshes.

The updated flow estimate is based on pressure readings. The FRTG was finally allowed access to the wellhead on July 15, just before BP installed its latest cap. At the time the measurement was taken, the scientists estimated that the well was releasing 53,000 barrels of oil into the Gulf. But they believe pressure in the reservoir must have declined during the span of the disaster, concluding that earlier 62,000 barrels must have been released daily.

The only spill larger in volume than the BP disaster was the Lakeview Gusher, a land-based spill that took place north of Los Angeles in 1910. Its impact was far less severe than the current catastrophe, however. In

spite of repeated media reports, claims that retreating Iraqi soldiers released hundreds of millions of gallons of Kuwaiti oil into the Persian Gulf in 1991—first made as a part of US war propaganda—were debunked many years ago by a few studies, including one carried out in 1993 by Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission at UNESCO and several Persian Gulf nations.

Under the Clean Water Act, the federal government can levy a fine of \$4,300 per spilled barrel on BP if it is determined that the disaster was the result of gross negligence. In fact there is overwhelming evidence of criminal negligence, including a plethora of reckless decisions made to accelerate well capping in the last days and hours before the April 20 disaster. To date, not a single figure from BP has been disciplined, much less arrested, for the blowout that killed 11 workers.

BP, however, is banking that the Obama administration will apply the much softer fine of \$1,100 per barrel levied by the Clean Water Act when it is determined no gross negligence took place. In its second quarter earnings statement BP already wrote off losses based on the smaller fine.

In this assumption BP's executives have history on their side. Since April 20 the Obama administration, Congress and the courts have been centrally preoccupied with protecting BP, its shareholders and the oil industry as a whole.

The effort to shield BP has featured a relentless cover-up of the catastrophe's dimensions and consequences. The US Coast Guard, functioning as a private BP security force, has blocked independent scientists, the media and citizens from visiting the hardest-hit beaches, flying over the surface spill, and speaking with ill cleanup workers. Over the last week these police-state measures have been supplemented by a media campaign declaring the impact of the spill to have been blown out of proportion.

But the cover-up's most disastrous feature was the collusion between BP and the White House to deny the size of the spill. Without knowledge of the dimensions of the spill—greater by a factor of 50 than first reported—an adequate response was impossible.

In the first days after the blowout, BP and the Obama administration claimed that there was no oil spill. Since then the estimated spill rate has gone from 1,000 barrels a day, to 5,000 barrels, then to 12,000 to 19,000 barrels, then to 25,000 to 30,000 barrels, and finally to 52,000 barrels.

Upward revisions only took place in the face of criticism from independent scientists, who were able to conclude, based on the limited evidence available to them, that the disaster was far worse than what the public was being told. In each stage of this process, the new statistic was subsequently proven to be the latest lie.

The new estimate comes as BP enters final preparations for its latest effort to close off the Macondo well. The “static kill” will involve pumping tens of thousands of gallons of heavy mud through the collapsed rig's blowout preventer in a bid to force oil back down into its reservoir.

The static kill was set to start on Tuesday with the aim of completion the next day. After this, it is hoped, the well can be sealed off with cement. According to former Coast Guard Commander Thad Allen, who heads up the government response, there remain concerns over the integrity of the well casing.

No clear explanation has been supplied as to why the static kill has been favored over the drilling of relief wells, which for weeks were presented as the only possible solution.

In mid-July BP abruptly halted the drilling of relief wells—one was reportedly within feet of reaching the Macondo—and announced a new capping procedure. This was presented as a two-day pressure test to determine whether or not there was damage to the well casing that descends thousands of feet below the seabed. Even though the pressure readings failed, BP unilaterally declared that the cap would remain in place.

After a brief public dispute with BP, Allen backed down and signed off on the maintenance of the new cap. Oil and methane have been found emerging from the seabed near the Macondo, but Allen and BP claim

this is from another well.

Whatever the motivations behind the zigzags of the last three weeks, the one thing that is certain is that the American people are not being told the truth, as the three-month effort to cover up the size of the spill makes clear.



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