

Obama declares Gulf disaster “coming to an end”

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The Obama administration on Wednesday stepped up its efforts to declare the Gulf oil catastrophe at an end.

The public relations campaign, which is based on little scientific evidence, aims to bury the ongoing disaster in advance of the midterm elections, protect BP from further financial damages, and accelerate deep-sea oil drilling operations under the same environment of total deregulation that led to the April 20 blowout at the Deepwater Horizon rig.

In the morning, the Obama administration’s National Incident Command issued a three-page report, “BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Budget: What Happened to the Oil?,” that all but declared the blowout to be an insignificant event.

Hours later BP claimed success in its latest effort to seal the Macondo well. The “static kill” process of pumping heavy mud into the well’s blowout preventer worked, BP declared, paving the way for the completion of two relief wells later this month. It is impossible to independently verify BP’s claims.

Later in the day, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulators, appearing before a Congressional hearing, gave an *ex post facto* clean bill of health to the spill response’s heavy use of the chemical dispersant Corexit 9500, which is known to be highly toxic.

Finally, speaking to a convention of AFL-CIO officials on Wednesday, Obama hailed the latest developments and stated that “the long battle to stop the leak and contain the oil is finally close to coming to an end.”

Residents of the Gulf can only take Obama’s words and the day’s media events as an ominous warning. Cleanup operations, which BP has already begun to scale back, will soon enough be brought to a halt. The enormous dose of toxins dumped into the sea and on the coastline will be left to “Mother Nature,” as Obama environmental advisor Carol Browner put it. Workers who have lost their jobs and business owners who face bankruptcy will be left to their own devices. And the public health crisis—whose initial

manifestation in sick cleanup workers has been largely hidden—will be denied.

On the other hand, all of the day’s events and pronouncements redound to the benefit of BP. The political purpose of the campaign was underlined by Senate Democrats’ abandonment of a bill that would have put in place new safety measures for offshore drilling and would have raised the federal liability cap on corporations responsible for oil spills, which is currently set at the absurdly low level of \$75 million.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid blamed the removal of the bill from floor debate, which he claimed to be a temporary measure, on Republican opposition. In reality the bill had little support among Democrats and faced open opposition from oil state Democrats Mary Landrieu of Louisiana and Mark Begich of Alaska. The oil industry cheered the decision.

On Tuesday, Michael Bromwich, director of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement, indicated that the Obama administration is likely to lift its ban on issuing permits for new deep-sea drilling operations ahead of its scheduled November 30 expiration. “I think it is everybody’s hope that we will feel comfortable enough that the moratorium can be lifted significantly in advance of Nov. 30,” Bromwich said. The moratorium was largely a palliative measure that only affected 33 drilling operations. It nonetheless triggered massive opposition from the oil industry.

The move toward resumption of deep-sea oil drilling needed a “scientific” cover that minimizes the scope of the Deepwater Horizon disaster. This was provided on Wednesday by the National Incident Command’s rosy assessment, “BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Budget: What Happened to the Oil?”

According to the study, one fourth of all oil from the spill was captured or burned by BP, another fourth has been dissolved or evaporated through natural processes, and another fourth has been broken into tiny particles either

through natural process or chemical dispersants. The remaining quarter has settled into sediment and seashore. The report declares the dispersed oil to be harmless.

The report is ostensibly based on the work of several government agencies. But there is almost no evidence offered in the thin report to substantiate the assertions, and still less reason to trust the agencies who ostensibly supplied the data. NOAA, for example, notoriously insisted until mid-June that the daily spill rate was 5,000 barrels per day—less than one tenth of the actual total.

"There's some science here, but mostly it's spin, and it breaks my heart to see them do it," commented University of South Florida oceanographer Ian McDonald. "This is an unfortunate report. I'm afraid this continues a track record of doubtful information distributed through NOAA."

Gulf coast workers also expressed distrust of the report. "There are still boats out there every day working, finding turtles with oil on them and seeing grass lines with oil in it," charter boat captain Randy Boggs, of Orange Beach, Alabama, told the Associated Press. "Certainly all the oil isn't accounted for. There are millions of pounds of tar balls and oil on the bottom."

"As soon as BP gets this oil out of sight, they'll get it out of mind, and we'll be left to deal with it alone," said crabber Oliver Rudesill, 28, of Yscloskey, Louisiana.

Scientists expressed similar doubts over EPA and NOAA claims that the use of chemical dispersants—1.8 million gallons in total—has proven harmless.

Louisiana State University oceanographer Robert Carney told the *Wall Street Journal* that the EPA's testing method is similar to attempting to assess the immediate health impact of eating a large amount of sugar.

"It would conclude that it isn't great for our health but it isn't going to kill us, yet a lifetime of sugar can kill you," he said. "We worry about similar things in the environment."

Early in the spill, the EPA ordered BP to suspend use of Corexit. The oil giant, which has close personnel ties to the chemical's manufacturer, Nalco, simply refused, and the Obama administration backed down.

The EPA's subsequent endorsement of the chemical is not entirely supported within its ranks. EPA senior policy analyst Hugh Kaufman has publicly attacked the use of the dispersant.

The dispersants were used "to hide the magnitude of the spill and save BP money," Kaufman told Democracy Now on July 20. "And the government—both EPA, NOAA, etc.—have been sock puppets for BP in this cover-up. Now, by hiding the amount of spill, BP is saving hundreds of millions, if not billions, of dollars in fines."

"Consequently, we have people, wildlife—we have dolphins that are hemorrhaging," Kaufman continued.

"People who work near it are hemorrhaging internally. And that's what dispersants are supposed to do. EPA now is taking the position that they really don't know how dangerous it is, even though if you read the label, it tells you how dangerous it is. And, for example, in the Exxon Valdez case, people who worked with dispersants, most of them are dead now. The average death age is around fifty. It's very dangerous, and it's an economic—it's an economic protector of BP, not an environmental protector of the public."

Local media accounts from the Gulf reveal that BP is accelerating its shut-down of the cleanup effort.

In Destin, Florida, located about 30 miles east of Pensacola, representatives from BP, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the Coast Guard on Tuesday told a town hall meeting of cleanup workers—largely displaced fishermen and charter boat operators—that they would scale back the "Vessels of Opportunity" program because no oil was being found in the area, according to the *Destin Log*.

This brought an angry reaction from fishermen, who said that oil was in fact being recovered. "A lot of the product that's been turned in is not being reported," said boat captain Joey Verkes. "Sunday afternoon, they turned in 67 25-pound bags of oiled absorbent materials." Other fishermen enrolled in the program complained that they had yet to be put to work.

And in Alabama, a firm contracting cleanup work for BP, Plant Performance Services, announced that it was cutting the hourly pay of cleanup workers by \$4 to \$10, a local news station reported. Workers will now receive as little as \$14 per hour for the dangerous job, which has sickened hundreds, and perhaps thousands, up and down the Gulf Coast.



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