

BP seals well, but environmental disaster continues

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Five months into the Deepwater Horizon disaster, BP's Macondo well has finally been sealed. BP successfully intercepted the Macondo with a relief well on Friday, pumping the well full of cement. Pressure tests completed Sunday morning confirmed the well had been "killed." In a statement following the procedure, National Incident Commander Thad Allen reported "we can now state, definitively, that the Macondo well poses no continuing threat to the Gulf of Mexico."

Official estimates by the National Incident Command's Flow Rate Technical Group place the amount of oil leaked into the Gulf of Mexico since the disaster began on April 20 at 206 million gallons, or 4.9 million barrels, making it the largest oil spill in history.

While the well has now been sealed successfully, the environmental catastrophe in the Gulf continues. The past week brought new reports of oil washing ashore on beaches in Louisiana and Florida. The *Times-Picayune* of New Orleans describes "a new wave of black oil" coming ashore west of the Mississippi River "coating beaches and fouling interior marshes." Bay Jimmie, Bay Wilkerson and Bay Baptiste were all contaminated by the new wave of oil.

In Florida, the *Pensacola News Journal* reports the complaints of local residents who have discovered large numbers of new tar balls washing up at Pensacola Beach. Pensacola's Phyllis Neal told the *Journal*, "There were thousands of [tar balls], hundreds of thousands of them. They were floating in the water. Some were as big as hamburgers. I've lived here four years, and I've never seen anything like this."

In addition to the oil still washing up on beaches, large amounts of oil continue to contaminate the Gulf of Mexico's waters. Miles of oil sludge coat the Gulf seafloor, as thick as two inches in some areas, while

subsurface oil plumes, at least one of them 22 miles long, still persist.

Responding to the news that the well had finally been killed, President Obama declared it an "important milestone." Obama gave his assurance that his administration remained "committed to doing everything possible to make sure the Gulf Coast recovers fully from this disaster," adding, "This road will not be easy, but we will continue to work closely with the people of the Gulf to rebuild their livelihoods and restore the environment that supports them."

In fact just the opposite is taking place. BP's cleanup efforts have already been greatly reduced in the region, with just 31,000 active cleanup workers in August, compared to 48,000 at the height of recovery operations.

In addition to abandoning Gulf cleanup and restoration, both BP and the Obama administration have worked to reduce the number of claimants to be paid through the \$20 billion compensation fund set up by BP. Fund administrator Kenneth Feinberg, appointed by Obama and on the BP payroll, has placed significant limitations on who may be paid through the fund. Large numbers of fishermen, in particular, whose businesses have primarily been cash-based, stand to lose out on compensation payments because they do not have adequate documentation of their transactions.

So far, only 22 percent of claims have been paid. In the meantime, many Gulf residents waiting on payments have reported suffering significant financial hardships, including an inability to pay their bills and the closure of small businesses.

In spite of this, Feinberg has defended the current claims system, saying, "I want to emphasize that I think that overall the program is a success," adding, "We are being more generous than BP ever was, and we are

getting the money out faster than BP ever got it out.”

From the beginning, BP’s chief concern has been its own bottom line. Now there are indications that the oil giant has plans to return to the lucrative oil reservoir beneath its killed well.

“There’s a lot of oil and gas here,” BP Chief Operating Officer Doug Suttles said in August, “We’re going to have to think about what to do with that at some point.” BP has estimated that the reservoir could contain as much as 50 million barrels of oil. The company could potentially extract \$4 billion worth of oil from below the seafloor.



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