

Six months of the Gulf oil disaster

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October 20 marked the six-month anniversary of the Deepwater Horizon disaster, which claimed the lives of 11 workers and began the largest oil spill in history. Before BP's Macondo well was finally sealed in September, five months into the disaster, 185 million gallons of oil were spilled into the Gulf of Mexico.

With the well permanently sealed, the Obama administration and BP are attempting to put the disaster behind them. The White House has assured the public that the "vast majority" of the oil spilled into the Gulf is gone, either collected by cleanup crews or dispersed with chemical agents. The moratorium on offshore drilling has been lifted six weeks ahead of schedule, with assurances by Interior Secretary Ken Salazar that the appropriate measures are now in place to ensure the safety of future offshore drilling projects. Neither claim has any credibility.

While the White House seeks to whitewash the impact of the spill and clear the way for the major oil corporations to return to business as usual in the Gulf, the economic and environmental devastation caused by the oil spill continues.

NBC News reports 560 miles of the Gulf coastline remain contaminated by oil, including the shores of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida. While much of the oil found on beaches in Mississippi, Alabama and Florida is in the form of tar balls, Louisiana's coastal waters remain devastated, particularly in the area of Plaquemines Parish, home to Bay Jimmy. A cleanup contractor working in the bay has reported pulling 32,000 gallons of oil from its waters during a 10-day period earlier this month.

On Friday, fishermen working for BP's remaining cleanup crews reported large amounts of weathered oil on the surface of the water in Louisiana's West Bay. Oil was seen in large swaths up to a mile long and up to 400 feet wide, making its way to the marshlands of the Mississippi River Delta.

The Times-Picayune New Orleans reporter, who said fishermen who spotted these enormous sheets of oil had been reporting significant amounts of oil in the area for more than a week "but have seen little response from BP or the Coast Guard." *Times-Picayune* photojournalist Matthew Hinton confirmed the presence of oil.

While oil still fouls the shorelines and waters of the Gulf of Mexico, the number of BP cleanup workers has dramatically decreased in recent months. At the height of cleanup operations, there were 48,000 active workers in the Gulf; now only 16,200 remain.

The spill has taken an enormous toll on animal life in the region. The latest numbers from the US Fish and Wildlife Service show a total of 8,184 oiled birds collected in the Gulf since the spill began, with 6,104 of them found dead. The oil spill will continue to affect birds in the Gulf for years to come.

Describing the consequences of the contamination of a major pelican breeding colony in Louisiana, Interior Department Assistant Secretary Tom Strickland told reporters, "It was the most dramatic and heart-wrenching scene of oiled birds, with fledglings in their nests. The habitat was injured at a very fragile moment. We'll not only lose those birds, but the progeny of the birds, affecting the population for next year and the year after that and the year after that."

US Fish and Wildlife also reports a total of 1,140 oiled sea turtles collected, 605 of them found dead. Among the most devastated species of sea life in the Gulf is the bluefin tuna; a new report by the European Space Agency shows 20 percent of juvenile Atlantic bluefin tuna were killed as a result of the oil spill, which contaminated a large section of the species' spawning ground.

The fishing industry in the Gulf remains in a state of crisis. Louisiana's shrimp catch is down 52 percent from last year. A new report commissioned by Greater

New Orleans, Inc. projects a loss of up to \$172 million in gross revenue between 2011 and 2013 for the fishing industry. This financial hit could mean the loss of as many as 4,000 jobs, according to the GNO report.

For many of those whose livelihoods are bound up with the fishing and tourism industries, the promise of compensation through the \$20 billion fund set up by BP has gone unfulfilled. Popular anger over the fund is mounting, as BP's Gulf Coast Claims Facility fails to meet the overwhelming social need in the region.

Of the 220,603 claims filed with the GCCF so far, only 76,479 have been paid. The region's newspapers are filled with reports of delays of several weeks in payments and unexplained rejections, even in cases where claimants have thorough documentation of their losses.

Upon assuming control of the compensation fund in August, Kenneth Feinberg, an Obama appointee who is also on the BP payroll, made clear that he would limit as much as possible the amount BP would be forced to pay out to spill victims. Only those with well-documented claims, showing a "direct" impact of the spill on their jobs or businesses would be considered legitimate. Fishermen whose businesses operate primarily on a cash basis and businesses dependent upon the tourism industry face significant obstacles in applying for and receiving compensation from BP under Feinberg's requirements.

As each week brings further indications of a continuing social disaster in the Gulf, it becomes more and more evident that the Obama administration has essentially abandoned the residents of the Gulf coast states in their time of need.

The livelihoods of workers across the Gulf have been wiped out, small businesses have folded, and the environment on which the fishing industry depends has been devastated. And yet not one executive from BP or Transocean, the companies primarily responsible for the spill, has been held accountable. The criminal investigation threatened by the White House months ago has long since been dropped.

The role of the Obama administration from the beginning of the disaster has been to defend the profit interests of BP and shield the oil giant and the industry as a whole from financial and criminal liabilities.

Coverage of the Gulf Coast has all but disappeared from the cable news networks. The oil giants and their

representatives in Washington face no pressure at all from the major news outlets. BP, Transocean and the other major companies in the oil industry will return to business as usual, having suffered no significant penalties and with no substantial changes to safety practices within the industry.



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