U. S. Environmental Protection Agency
Blog Round-up
Prepared by the Office of Public Affairs

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ROUND-UP OF MAJOR BLOGS

BP SPILL

BP Oil Spill Nears Record As Largest In Gulf History (*Huffington Post*)

NEW ORLEANS (Associated Press) - BP's massive oil spill will become the largest ever in the Gulf of Mexico by Thursday based on the highest of the federal government's estimates, an ominous record that underscores the oil giant's dire need to halt the gusher.

The oil that's spewed for two and a half months from a blown-out well a mile under the sea is expected to surpass the 140 million gallon mark, eclipsing the record-setting Ixtoc I spill off Mexico's coast from 1979 to 1980. Even by the lower end of the government's estimates, at least 71.2 million gallons are in the Gulf.

The growing total is crucial to track, in part because Great Britain-based BP PLC is likely to be fined per gallon spilled, said Larry McKinney, director of Texas A&M University at Corpus Christi's Gulf of Mexico research institute.

"It's an important number to know because it has an impact on restoration and recovery," McKinney said.

The oil calculation is based on the higher end of the government's range of barrels leaked per day, minus the amount BP says it has collected from the blown-out well using two containment systems. Measuring it helps scientists figure out where the missing oil is, hidden below the water surface with some even stuck to the seafloor. Oil not at the surface damages different parts of the ecosystem.

"It's a mind-boggling number any way you cut it," said Ed Overton, a Louisiana State University environmental studies professor who consults for the federal government on oil spills. "It'll be well beyond Ixtoc by the time it's finished."

And passing Ixtoc just before the July Fourth weekend, a time of normally booming tourism, is bitter timing, he said.

Story continues below

The BP spill, which began after the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig explosion killed 11 workers April 20, is also the largest spill ever recorded offshore during peacetime.

But it's not the biggest in history.

That happened when Iraqi forces opened valves at a terminal and dumped about 460 million gallons of oil in 1991 during the Persian Gulf war.

As the Gulf gusher neared the record, Hurricane Alex whipped oil-filled waves onto the Gulf Coast's once-white beaches. The government has pinned its latest cleanup hopes on a huge new piece of equipment: the world's largest oil-skimming vessel, which arrived Wednesday.

Officials hope the ship can scoop up to 21 million gallons of oil-fouled water a day. Dubbed the "A Whale," the Taiwanese-flagged former tanker spans the length of 3 1/2 football fields and is 10 stories high.

It just emerged from an extensive retrofitting to prepare it specifically for the Gulf.

"It is absolutely gigantic. It's unbelievable," said Overton, who saw the ship last week in Norfolk, Va.

The vessel looks like a typical tanker, but it takes in contaminated water through 12 vents on either side of the bow. The oil is then supposed to be separated from the water and transferred to another vessel. The water is channeled back into the sea.

But the ship's never been tested, and many questions remain about how it will operate. For instance, the seawater retains trace amounts of oil, even after getting filtered, so the Environmental Protection Agency will have to sign off on allowing the treated water back into the Gulf.

"This is a no-brainer," Overton said. "You're bringing in really dirty, oily water and you're putting back much cleaner water."

The Coast Guard will have the final say in whether the vessel can operate in the Gulf. The owner, shipping firm TMT Group, will have to come to separate terms with BP, which is paying for the cleanup.

"I don't know whether it's going to work or not, but it certainly needs to be given the opportunity," Overton said.

Meanwhile along parts of the Gulf, red flags snapped in strong gusts, warning people to stay out of the water, and long stretches of beach were stained brown from tar balls and crude oil that had been pushed as far as 60 yards from the water.

Hurricane Alex churned up rough seas as it plowed across the Gulf, dealing a tough setback to cleanup operations. It made landfall along a relatively unpopulated stretch of coast in Mexico's northern Tamaulipas state late Wednesday, spawning tornadoes in nearby Texas and forcing evacuations in both countries.

Oil deposits appeared worse than in past days and local officials feared the temporary halt to skimming operations near the coast would only make matters worse ahead of the holiday weekend.

"I'm real worried about what is going to happen with those boats not running. It can't help," said Tony Kennon, mayor of Orange Beach, Ala.

Although skimming operations and the laying of oil-corralling booms were halted across the Gulf, vessels that collect and burn oil and gas at the site of the explosion were still operating. Efforts to drill relief wells that experts hope will stop the leak also continued unabated.

In Florida, lumps of tar the size of dinner plates filled a large swath of beach east of Pensacola after rough waves tossed the mess onto shore.

Streaks of the rust-red oil could be seen in the waves off Pensacola Beach as cleanup crews worked in the rough weather to prepare the beach for the holiday weekend.

In Grand Isle, La., heavy bands of rain pounded down, keeping cleanup crews off the water and tossing carefully laid boom around. However, oil had stayed out of the passes.

"All this wave action is breaking up the oil very quickly," Coast Guard Cmdr. Randal S. Ogrydziak said. "Mother Nature is doing what she does best, putting things back in order."

Natural microbes in the water were also working on the spill. The result was a white substance that looked like mayonnaise, that washed up on some spots along the Grand Isle beach.

"People will be fishing here again," Ogrydziak said. "It may take a while, but people may be surprised that it's not taking as long as they thought. Look at the (Ixtoc) oil spill in Mexico. It was massive and now people are back to using those waters."

When Crisis Strikes, Cleanup Crews Also Face Uncertain Hazards (*Huffington Post*)

Posted by Kevin Liptak
Hazards facing cleanup workers in the Gulf are steadily being revealed—this week, two investigations uncover potentially dangerous conditions that could affect workers for their entire lives. Perhaps most troubling, however, is the lack of scientific information about working conditions. Without rigorous studies into the health effects of concentrated oil exposure and dispersant use, cleanup workers are unable to take precautions or avoid using certain substances.

The use of dispersants in the cleanup effort has been contentious from the start. As far back as May, workers were complaining of respiratory problems, headaches and nausea after pouring the chemicals into the Gulf. At the time, the Environmental Protection Agency vowed to cut use of the dispersant Corexit while searching for safer alternatives. A Miami Herald article this week finds the chemical still being used at amounts exceeding the recommended daily level. Yesterday, the EPA announced it had found no dispersants less toxic than Corexit, meaning the chemical will continue to be used at high levels in the Gulf. The EPA studies also failed to test the chemicals in combination with oil, a mixture that experts believe to be more toxic than the chemical alone.

The long-term effects of exposure to Corexit and to large concentrations of oil have never been studied—even following the last major oil spill, the Exxon Valdez disaster from 1989. A McClatchy investigation this week found little scientific information from that era that could help guide cleanup efforts today, despite anecdotal evidence that workers' health was imperiled. A workers union warned Alaska's labor department of potential kidney and nervous system damage following the spill, but no medical studies ensued.

Adding insult to injury, some of the cleanup workers are living in the same formaldehyde-laced trailers that became an icon of government incompetence following Hurricane Katrina. According to the New York Times, the trailers—which FEMA sold off in 2006—are reappearing in trailer parks as temporary residences for workers cleaning the slick. After Katrina, displaced New Orleans residents who lived in the trailers complained of breathing problems and burning eyes, conditions that were traced back to the chemical used in particleboard. Aside from the smell and fumes, formaldehyde is believed to cause nasal cancer and possibly leukemia.

APNewsBreak: Feds lean on BP over trash disposal (*Huffington Post*)

GARANCE BURKE | July 1, 2010 09:16 PM EST

The Coast Guard and the Environmental Protection Agency shored up their oversight of BP's work to clean up the oil-soaked Gulf Coast on Thursday, setting new standards for how the company and its contractors should test and track the garbage generated by the ongoing spill.

BP PLC has hired private contractors to haul away thousands of tons of polluted sand, crude-coated boom and other refuse washing ashore from the worst offshore spill in U.S. history.

So far the disaster has generated more than 3,913 tons of solid waste, which is being hauled to landfills in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and Florida.

Companies brought on to dispose of the material say the debris is being handled professionally and carefully, but a spot check by The Associated Press last week found clean-up procedures along the Gulf coast's northern reaches were haphazard at best.

In Alabama's Gulf State Park, a mound of oily sand was spotted in an uncovered waste container flanked by a pooling brown puddle, while in Orange Beach, a leaky truck piled with tar balls and oil-smeared protective gear left a pollution trail of its own.

A senior EPA official said Thursday no specific concerns prompted the directive but that it would make existing waste disposal plans federally enforceable.

"We felt that this is a unique and catastrophic event and we felt it should have the highest level of oversight and accountability," said Mathy Stanislaus, assistant administrator of the EPA's Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response. "This is part of our ongoing process to hold BP accountable."

Specific guidelines were outlined in letters sent to BP for how the refuse should be managed. The letters also mandated more public outreach to communities near the staging areas or landfills, Stanislaus said.

BP America spokesman Daren Beaudo said the company had not yet received the directive, so could not immediately comment.

Since May, BP has been testing samples of the oil, mousse and tar patties collecting along the shoreline for volatile organic compounds, metals, diesel and other chemicals. The EPA will start taking its own independent samples of the debris this week in the marshes and tidal flats and will ramp up inspections, Stanislaus said.

"We've been fingerprinting that oil all along, but if we have more people taking additional samples that is great," said Rodney Mallett, a spokesman for the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality, which is monitoring waste disposal in landfills throughout the state.

Waste Management Inc., the nation's largest trash hauler, was hired by BP to dispose of the mess washing ashore in Alabama, Mississippi and Florida.

"As in all of our operations including the Gulf response effort, Waste Management conducts its contracted activities according to all applicable state, local federal laws and regulations and directives, including this one," said company spokesman Ken Haldin. He said in response to The AP's findings last week that the company would be more careful and have drivers check bins for problems and possibly use larger liners.

Volunteers ready but left out of oil spill cleanup

TOM BREEN | July 1, 2010 11:56 PM EST |

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NEW ORLEANS — Many fishing boats signed up to skim oil sit idle in marinas. Some captains and deckhands say they have been just waiting around for instructions while drawing checks from BP of more than $1,000 a day per vessel. Thousands of offers to clean beaches and wetlands have gone unanswered.

BP and the Obama administration faced mounting complaints Thursday that they are ignoring foreign offers of badly needed equipment and making poor use of the fishing boats and volunteers available to help clean up what may now be the biggest spill ever in the Gulf of Mexico.

Based on some government estimates, more than 140 million gallons of crude have now spewed from the bottom of the sea since the April 20 explosion that killed 11 workers on the Deepwater Horizon oil platform, eclipsing the 1979-80 disaster off Mexico that had long stood as the worst in the Gulf.

In recent days and weeks, for reasons BP has never explained, many fishing boats hired for the cleanup have done a lot of waiting around. At the same time, there is mounting frustration over the time it has taken the government to approve offers of help from foreign countries and international organizations.

The Coast Guard said there have been 107 offers of help from 44 nations, ranging from technical advice to skimmer boats and booms. But many of those offers are weeks old, and only a small number have been accepted, with the vast majority still under review, according to a list kept by the State Department.

A report prepared by investigators with the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform for Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., detailed one case in which the Dutch government offered April 30 to provide four oil skimmers that collectively could process more than 6 million gallons of oily water a day. It took seven weeks for the U.S. to approve the offer.

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs on Thursday scorned the idea that "somehow it took the command 70 days to accept international help."

Story continues below

"That is a myth," he declared, "that has been debunked literally hundreds of times."

He said 24 foreign vessels were operating in the Gulf before this week. He did not specifically address the Dutch vessels.

More than 2,000 boats have signed up for oil-spill duty under BP's Vessel of Opportunity program. The company pays boat captains and their crews a flat fee based on the size of the vessel, ranging from $1,200 to $3,000 a day, plus a $200 fee for each crew member who works an eight-hour day.

Rocky Ditcharo, a shrimp dock owner in Buras, La., said many fishermen hired by BP have told him that they often park their boats on the shore while they wait for word on where to go.

"They just wait because there's no direction," Ditcharo said. He said he believes BP has hired many boat captains "to show numbers."

"But they're really not doing anything," he added. He also said he suspects the company is hiring out-of-work fishermen to placate them with paychecks.

Chris Mehlig, a fisherman from Louisiana's St. Bernard Parish, said he is getting eight days of work a month, laying down containment boom, running supplies to other boats or simply being on call dockside in case he is needed. "I wish I had more days than that, but that's the way things are," he said.

Billy Nungesser, president of Louisiana's hard-hit Plaquemines Parish, said BP and the Coast Guard provided a map of the exact locations of 140 skimmers that were supposedly cleaning up the oil. But he said that after he repeatedly asked to be flown over the area so he could see them at work, officials told him only 31 skimmers on the job.

"I'm trying to work with these guys," he said. "But everything they're giving me is a wish list, not what's actually out there."

A BP spokesman declined to comment.

Newly retired Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen, the government's point man for the response effort, bristled at some of the accusations in Issa's report.

"I think we've been pretty transparent throughout this," Allen said at the White House. He disputed any suggestion that there aren't enough skimmers being put on the water, saying the spill area is so big that there are bound to be areas with no vessels.

The Coast Guard said there are roughly 550 skimmers working in the Gulf, with 250 or so in Louisiana waters, 136 in Florida, 87 in Alabama and 76 in Mississippi, although stormy weather in recent days has kept the many of the vessels from working.

The frustration extends to the volunteers who have offered to clean beaches and wetlands. More than 20,000 volunteers have signed up to help in Florida, Alabama and Mississippi, yet fewer than one in six has received an assignment or the training required to take part in some chores, according to BP.

The executive director of the Alabama Coastal Foundation, Bethany Kraft, said many people who volunteered are frustrated and angry that no one has called on them for help.

"You see this unfolding before your eyes and you have this sense that you can't do anything," she said. "To watch this happen in our backyard and not be able to help is hard."

About 225 foundation volunteers have helped watch for oil and document coastal conditions, she said, but BP's rules require training for anyone touching oily material. And the company is using paid workers for nearly all such projects.

While the leak continued spewing crude into the Gulf, the remnants of Hurricane Alex more than 500 miles to the west were still being felt Thursday in the form of rough seas that slowed the cleanup, though some skimming had resumed.

Some government estimates put the amount of oil spilled at 160 million gallons. That calculation was arrived at by using the rate of 2.5 million gallons a day all the way back to the oil rig explosion. The AP, relying on scientists who advised the government on flow rate, bases its estimates on a lower rate of 2.1 million gallons a day up until June 3, when a cut to the well pipe increased flow.

By either estimate, the disaster would eclipse the Ixtoc disaster in the Gulf two decades ago and rank as the biggest offshore oil spill during peacetime. The bill spill in history happened in 1991 during the Persian Gulf War, when Iraqi forces opened valves at a terminal and dumped about 336 million gallons of oil.

The total in the Gulf disaster is significant because BP is likely to be fined per gallon spilled. Also, scientists say an accurate figure is needed to calculate how much oil may be hidden below the surface, doing damage to the deep-sea environment.

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And passing Ixtoc just before the July Fourth weekend, a time of normally booming tourism, is bitter timing, he said.

In other developments:

_ The House passed the first major bill related to explosion, voting to allow families of those killed and injured workers to be compensated far more generously than current law allows. The measure now goes to the Senate.

_ An animal welfare group said in a lawsuit that BP's practice of incinerating the oil is probably burning endangered sea turtles alive. BP spokesman Mark Proegler replied: "I can't say for sure we've never burned any, but every effort is taken to avoid that."

_ The Coast Guard and the Environmental Protection Agency are tightening up their oversight of BP and its contractors cleaning up the oily sand.

Associated Press writers Jay Reeves in Orange Beach, Ala., Michael Kunzelman in New Orleans, Harry R. Weber in Houston, and Seth Borenstein, Erica Werner and Eileen Sullivan in Washington contributed to this report.

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ENERGY

Could Dems get a strong energy bill if they abandoned cap-and-trade? (*Grist*)

Don't miss Jesse's great post from earlier today. It's thoughtful and provocative and I wanted to offer a few observations in response.

His basic take is as follows: the Dems, in their quixotic pursuit of a price on carbon -- even the leaky, ramshackle contraption that cap-and-trade has become -- are ignoring opportunities for real bipartisan progress on energy. Now they risk ending the year empty-handed, which will be disastrous for both them and the country.

Lemme say up front: if the Dems could wrangle the kind of energy bill Jesse describes, I would *happily* sacrifice the Kerry-Lieberman cap-and-trade system. It really is true that the role of carbon pricing has been exaggerated. In the short-term, smart energy provisions could do just as much to kick off the changes we need. We'll need carbon pricing eventually, but it's pretty much inevitable. After all, the EPA's going to regulate CO2 either way. Sooner or later, probably sooner, Congress is going to get serious about doing the same. In the meantime a *strong* energy bill would represent immense progress.

But is the bill Jesse describes in fact an available option? I have my doubts. I see two big problems.

First of all, PAYGO (pay as you go) rules now have the force of law. Congress *cannot* pass a bill that contains spending that isn't paid for. The notable feature of all the "energy-only" ideas is that they cost lots of money. As it happens, there's a handy source of revenue to pay for all that stuff: a price on carbon. But centrists and conservatives are absolutely, unbendingly opposed to raising revenue, including through carbon fees. So ... what's the solution? They can't pass a bill without revenue, and the opponents of the bill refuse to sign off on any revenue raising mechanism. What's the way out of that dilemma? Unless that question is answered, abandoning carbon pricing sounds to me like abandoning a bill.

Second, Jesse seems to assume good faith on the part of centrists and Republicans: they have legitimate, substantive concerns about cap-and-trade and are sincere in their support of energy alternatives. I don't see what in the past two years provides evidence for that proposition. Jesse presumes that if Dems give up something (else), conservatives would respond by accepting stronger energy measures. But when have conservatives given anything or moved at all in this faux debate? They don't care if a bill doesn't pass. In fact they *prefer* a bill doesn't pass! Their short-term self-interest is overwhelmingly served by blocking any Dem victory.

After all, we know what kind of energy provisions emerge from a bipartisan process: Bingaman's ACELA bill. That's the amount of efficiency Murkowski and crew were willing to sign off on. That's the level of RES they were willing to accept. Why should we believe they'll compromise and accept much stronger provisions? It's just not clear that the politics of *strong* energy measures are all that much more congenial. Seems to me the overwhelmingly likely outcome if carbon pricing is abandoned is something akin to ACELA, perhaps mildly improved.

That might be better than nothing, though that's arguable. But it doesn't seem like nearly so clear a choice as Jesse makes out.

PESTICIDES

Latest podcast: How cancer-causing methyl iodide snuck past the EPA and onto farm fields (*Grist*)

In the waning days of the Bush Administration, the EPA executed what will likely go down as the single most egregious decision in its less-than-stellar history: Ignoring strong warnings from independent scientists, it approved use of a pesticide so carcinogenic that scientists had previously used it to induce cancer in tissue samples. The chemical, a fumigant called methyl iodide, swiftly went into use in states with significant production of fruit, mainly strawberries. (I

chronicled the twisted tale on Grist at the time.) But one key strawberry-growing state held out: California, which subjected methyl iodide to a separate review process.

Well that process has now played out. Again, independent scientists cried foul; but now, the state stands on the verge of approving methyl iodide. Shocking the scientists whose opinions it had solicited, the state's Department of Pesticide Regulation has officially recommended that methyl iodide be approved for use. The public comment period closed on June 29; I'll report any updates here.

In this week's Victual Reality, my podcast series about food politics, I talk to Susan Kegley, organic chemist and long-time science guru for the California-based Pesticide Action Network of North America, which has just issued a brand-new report (PDF) showing that drift from fumigants such as methyl iodide routinely shows up at alarming rates in air of nearby communities, "even when all application rules were followed and no equipment failure occurred."

In the podcast, Kegley explains how this stubborn chemical keeps repelling scientists and gaining favor from politicians -- and what the next steps are in the fight to keep it out of America's fruit fields.