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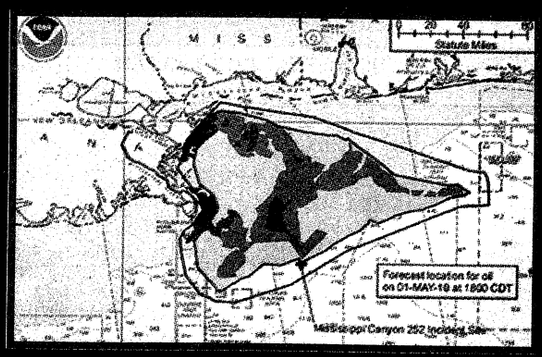
'Worse than Katrina'



A NOAA illustration showing the spill's progress.

Gulf Coast braces for oil disaster

BY J.R. WELSH
Staff Writer

Thousands of gallons of crude oil that have been gushing into the Gulf of Mexico for a week were surging toward Mississippi waters late Friday, as Hancock County and surrounding areas prepared for the worst local disaster since Hurricane Katrina.

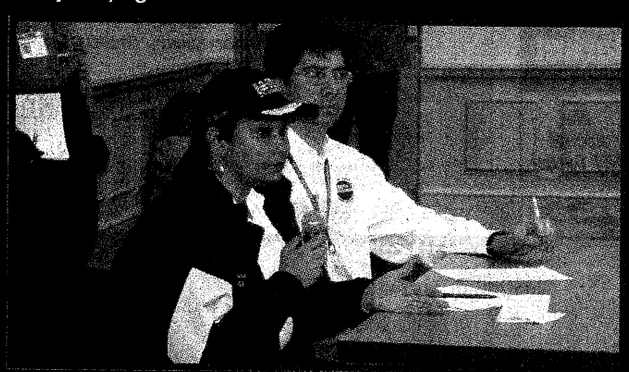
The difference is that the dreaded hurricane came and went in a matter of hours. But once it arrives, pollution caused by the Deepwater Horizon oil rig that sunk on April 22 could be around a long, long time.

"We are in the cross-hairs of a catastrophe once again," said Rocky Pullman, president of the Hancock County Board of Supervisors. "It's not a hurricane, but rather an environmental disaster."

The oil is expected to arrive in the form of a heavy sheen, stringy tar balls, and asphalt-type substances. Underwater tar may precede the heavier flow, officials said.

Echo staff photo by J.R. Welsh

Workers from U.S. Environmental placed oil booms along the train bridge in Bay St. Louis Friday morning. The Bay of St. Louis, Bayou Caddy, and the Pass Harbor are expected to be protected by the booms. Below: EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson speaks to about 300 members of the seafood industry Friday afternoon in Waveland. Related story on page 3A.



Crews were placing containment booms in the waters of the Bay of St. Louis and Bayou Caddy Friday. The oil is expected to arrive here by Sunday afternoon, propelled by choppy seas and stiff southeast winds.

By late Friday, NOAA maps showed the northern tip of the oil mass approaching Cat Island.

At risk are wildlife, fragile marshes and islands, the fishing, shrimp and oyster industries, as well as tourism, recreational fishing, and miles

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Disaster

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of white beaches that draw visitors from around the country.

Meanwhile, the leaking BP PLC well located 50 miles off Louisiana continues to release 210,000 gallons of crude oil daily. Efforts to shut off the well or find other ways to stop the flow continue. But a solution could be weeks, if not months, away.

"I have not been sugar-coating this," said Coast Guard Rear Adm. Mary Landry, on-site incident coordinator in the BP case. "We are in a very serious situation. We haven't had a well spill like this" in U.S. history, she added.

BP officials originally said the well was leaking 1,000 barrels of oil per day. But that changed Thursday, when it became known that the flow rate was far greater.

"The estimate of 1,000 was probably low," Doug Suttles, BP Group Chief Executive, admitted at a press conference. "It's probably more like 5,000."

Oil booms are being strung all along the Mississippi Coast by U.S. Environmental, a company hired by BP. The oil company has also hired Tri-State Bird Rescue, a non-profit group, to help save sea birds endangered by the oil.

Oil was moving Friday through Chandeleur Sound, where thousands of birds nest in the spring months.

Containment booms placed across the mouth of the Bay of St. Louis appeared futile only hours after being strung. Some were tangled around pilings of the CSX Railroad bridge, and high waves were causing water to sweep completely over the barriers.

Brian Adam, director of emergency management for Hancock County, said requests would likely be made for more booms to be placed at the mouths of rivers, canals and bayous inside the bay, in calmer waters. Booms are also being placed across inlets to the west of Bayou Caddy, all the way to Pearl River, he said.

In Pass Christian, officials said they were requesting that booms be placed across the entrance to Pass Harbor.

Officials are also keeping a nervous eye on the weather. Thunder and lighting storms were expected through today, followed by rains on into Monday. That leaves a threat of high water in low-lying areas.

Should oil-polluted waters cross low-lying roads, the oil will remain when the water recedes, said Hancock County road superintendent Bill Johnson. "That will leave us with slick, dangerous roads," he said.

There were no predictions by federal or state officials of ground water contamination in Hancock County, but local officials were not discounting the possibility. "They won't say anything about it, but we know our area," Adam said.

On Friday, the county, Waveland, and Bay St. Louis passed declarations of emergency.

Also Friday, the chief executive of BP in London said his company will compensate anyone adversely affected by the Deepwater Horizon disaster. "We are taking full responsibility for the spill and we will clean it up," Tony Hayward said in an interview with Reuters. If legitimate damage claims are presented, he added, "we will honor them."

Congressman Gene Taylor issued a call Friday for the Navy to take control of the spill remediation. "Federal authorities have given BP two weeks to handle the situation," Taylor wrote to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. So far, Taylor said, that has not worked.

At one point during the week, the Coast Guard gave permission for BP to set fire to an area of spill contained by booms. After one burn, that tactic was abandoned because of winds and high water.

"It's going to take a little time" to judge the effectiveness of burning off the oil, said Charlie Henry, a NOAA official.

Staff writer Dwayne Bremer contributed to this story

Deepwater Horizon: Impact on Hancock County

Anticipated arrival of oil pollution in Hancock waters: Sunday afternoon, possibly earlier. Forms expected: Heavy sheen, stringy tar balls, asphalt-type substances.

Present dangers: Possible high water in low-lying areas. Dangerous driving conditions, if oil covers roadways. Expect sporadic road closures.

Groundwater contamination not presently predicted.

Weather: Severe thunderstorms today, with continued heavy rainfall possible Sunday and Monday. Choppy seas.

Local areas with containment booms placed: Bay of St. Louis, Bayou Caddy, inlets west to the Pearl River.

The Big Picture

- 5,000 barrels of oil - 210,000 gallons per day - still leaking from Deepwater Horizon site.
- Barrels of oily water recovered as of Friday: 20,313. Gallons of dispersement applied by aircraft: 139,459.
- Response vessels involved: 75
- Feet of barrier booms placed: 217,000
- To report oiled or injured wildlife: 800-557-1401
- To discuss spill-related damage claims: 800-440-0858

Sources: Hancock County Emergency Management Agency, U.S. Coast Guard, Deepwater Horizon Unified Command.