

BP to place new containment cap on oil spill

July 10 2010, by Mira Oberman



A worker cleans oily globs that washed ashore in Waveland, Mississippi. Energy giant BP was expected to begin a new effort Saturday to contain a Gulf of Mexico oil spill by placing a better cap over the gushing well in hopes to stop the flow of oil completely.

Energy giant BP was expected to begin a new effort Saturday to contain a Gulf of Mexico oil spill by placing a better cap over the gushing well in hopes to stop the flow of oil completely.

Admiral Thad Allen, who oversees the government's spill response, said late Friday he had approved the plan to simultaneously install the Helix Producer and "capping stack" containment mechanisms over the well.

However, the operation will require temporary suspension of the current top hat containment system. That means about 15,000 barrels of oil a day that had been collected through the old capping system will spew directly into the Gulf until the new cap is in place.

"I validated this plan because the capacity for oil containment when these installations are complete will be far greater than the capabilities we have achieved using current systems," Allen explained.

He said favorable weather was expected in the spill area over the coming days, which "will provide the working conditions necessary for these transitions to be successfully completed without delays."

The transition to this new containment infrastructure could begin in the next days but will take seven to 10 days to complete, the admiral said.

If successful, the new cap could capture all of the crude spilling into the Gulf and allow it to be siphoned up to container vessels on the surface, in effect halting the devastating spill of crude into the sea that has imperiled fragile coastlines and wildlife across the Gulf Coast.

The operation is the latest attempt to contain the spill that was sparked by the April 20 explosion aboard the BP-leased Deepwater Horizon oil rig.

BP said meanwhile in a letter to Allen that it wants to move forward with its plan.

Managing Director Bob Dudley said the company wanted to take advantage of forecast good weather to place a more effective cap over the leak and hook up the new containment ship, the Helix Producer.

Under a timeline released by BP, the relief well that would permanently

seal the leak would be completed by August 13.

Earlier, Allen said he was optimistic about a fix soon for the environmental disaster.

"We have a significant chance to dramatically reduce the oil that's being released into the environment and maybe shut the well in altogether in the next week," he told CNN Friday.

The White House has pushed for the new containment device because its superior seal is expected to capture the entire leak and is better equipped to deal with a hurricane threat in the storm-prone Gulf.

Crews have already seen clean-up and containment operations hampered by bad weather and with an active storm season predicted, officials are busy developing contingencies.

The new system will use "quick-disconnect couplings" allowing container ships to shut down operations and exit the area quickly in the face of a hurricane, Allen said.

The news comes just after President Barack Obama's administration lost a bid to lift a stay of its six-month freeze on deepwater drilling in the Gulf.

Current government estimates of the spill range from between 35,000 to 60,000 barrels a day, based on interpretation of a live video feed of the leak.

An estimated two to four million barrels of oil have gushed into the Gulf waters since the spill began, and a permanent solution is not expected until one of two relief wells is completed.

Oil has now washed up on beaches in all five Gulf states -- Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida -- forcing the closure of fishing grounds and threatening scores of coastal communities with financial ruin.

The spill prompted the Obama administration to order a moratorium on deepwater drilling, but the freeze was overturned by a federal court last month and an appeals court upheld that ruling on Thursday.

The government "made no showing that there is any likelihood that drilling activities will be resumed pending appeal," the court said.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar has said he will soon issue a new order to block deepwater drilling, regardless of how the court ruled, and that [oil](#) companies have not resumed drilling due to the legal uncertainties.

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Citation: BP to place new containment cap on oil spill (2010, July 10) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-07-bp-cap-oil.html>

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