

US resumes oil skimming after Hurricane Alex

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The Transocean Development Driller III (R) and the Discoverer Enterprise drilling rig continue the effort to recover oil and cap the Deepwater Horizon spill site in the Gulf of Mexico.

Efforts to clean up the Gulf of Mexico oil spill gathered steam Monday after Hurricane Alex prompted a five-day shutdown, amid new questions over how BP would pay for the mounting costs.

Cleanup workers arrived back on Grand Isle, Louisiana by the hundreds, spilling off school buses that shuttled them in from around the state.

In the wake of Hurricane Alex, beaches, shorelines and marshes lay smeared with thick patches of [oil](#) and the sky was still filled with ominous, gray clouds.

"This is definitely the most oil I've seen. So far," said one worker who declined to give his name.

Skimming operations resumed in Louisiana but high seas kept vessels tied up in harbor in three other southeastern US states and no controlled burns were being carried out.

But officials said other operations to fend off the spill, including laying protective boom, were back on track.

Skimming was suspended last week as [Tropical Storm](#) Alex, which later became the first Atlantic [hurricane](#) of the 2010 season, entered the Gulf.

As it faces a massive bill for its efforts to clean up the oily mess -- up to 60 billion dollars by some estimates -- BP is turning to rival oil groups and sovereign wealth funds to fend off a possible hostile takeover bid, reports said.

The National, an Emirati newspaper based in Abu Dhabi, reported that sovereign wealth funds in the oil-rich Middle East have proposed making a strategic investment in BP, which has pledged to place 20 billion dollars in an escrow account to pay for the cleanup in the Gulf.

The firms were also allegedly mulling buying key assets from BP and financially backing any capital the oil company might plan to raise after the British energy giant lost over half of its stock market value and saw its shares plunge in the wake of the disaster.

Britain's Sunday Times meanwhile said BP was seeking a strategic

investor to buy a five- to 10-percent stake in the embattled firm with a pricetag of up to 9.1 billion dollars (six billion pounds).

BP said on Monday that it has now spent 3.12 billion dollars on the [Gulf of Mexico](#) oil disaster, up from 2.65 billion dollars last week.

BP now hopes the giant Taiwanese supertanker "A Whale" can exponentially boost the amount of oil and water mix being scooped up from the surface of the gulf.

The tanker should be able to vacuum up 21 million gallons of oily water a day, separate it and spit the seawater back out.

Only 28.2 million gallons have been collected by smaller skimming boats over the past 10 weeks since the April 20 explosion that ripped through the BP-leased Deepwater Horizon rig triggered the worst environmental disaster in US history.

Tests on the 300-yard-long (275-meter) tanker-turned-skimmer were expected to be completed by Monday before officials decide whether to deploy it.

Seventy-five days into the spill, the oil has fouled some 444 miles (715 kilometers) of shoreline in four southeastern US states, killed wildlife and put a big dent in the region's multi-billion-dollar fishing industry.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration meanwhile expanded the area closed to fishing in the Gulf beyond the current northwestern boundary off Louisiana, bringing to the closure to 81,181 square miles (210,258 square kilometers).

That represents about 33.5 percent of the Gulf's federal waters.

The spill has endangered livelihoods throughout the region and even put a damper on Independence Day celebrations Sunday.

In Grand Isle, American flags were flying, but instead of a day on the beach and fishing rodeos, families were filling inflatable swimming pools just yards from shuttered seafood restaurants.

"I haven't stepped on the beach in weeks now," said Amy Lafourt, a bartender at Artie's, a beachfront bar and music club.

Kenneth Feinberg, the administrator of BP's escrow fund told "Fox News Sunday" he would try to "maximize" payouts.

"You have to look at each and every case," said Feinberg, a prominent lawyer who also oversaw a fund for victims of the September 11, 2001 attacks.

"I'm working for the people in the Gulf. I want to try and maximize as much compensation as I can do fairly and consistently to the people I'm trying to serve down there."

Estimates suggest between 35,000 and 60,000 barrels of oil per day are gushing into the sea. An operation to permanently cap the ruptured well on the seafloor far below the surface cannot begin until engineers finish drilling relief wells, in mid-August at the earliest.

But despite its role in the oil spill, BP remained a key supplier of fuel to the Pentagon, The Washington Post reported late Sunday.

Citing data from the Defense Logistics Agency, the newspaper said BP had contracts with the US Defense Department worth at least 980 million dollars in the current fiscal year.

In fiscal 2009, BP was the Pentagon's largest single supplier of fuel, providing 11.7 percent of the total purchased, and in 2010, its contracts amount to roughly the same percentage, the report said.

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