

Tropical depression halts drilling at Gulf well

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A worker cleans oil boom used for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill with a pressure washer in Lafitte, La., Friday, Aug. 6, 2010. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)

(AP) -- Drilling the final feet of a relief well intended to permanently plug the busted BP oil well deep below the Gulf of Mexico will have to wait two to three days as a strengthening tropical depression bears down on the site.

BP and Coast Guard officials had already decided to stop drilling earlier Tuesday, before forecasters at the National Hurricane Center named the storm a depression. A tropical storm warning was issued for much of the Gulf Coast affected by the oil spill, from Destin, Fla., to Intracoastal City, La.

The center of the storm was located off Florida, hundreds of miles

southeast of the mouth of the [Mississippi River](#). It was moving northwest and was expected to strengthen slowly and become a tropical storm on Wednesday.

Retired Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen, the government's point man on the spill, said the last steps will have to wait for ending any threat from the well that spewed more than 200 million gallons of oil over three months before a temporary cap sealed it in mid-July.

Crews will pop in a temporary plug to safeguard what they've drilled so far, but they won't send workers back to land. They have about 30 to 50 feet left to drill.

The relief well is meant to allow BP PLC to pump mud and cement into the broken one from deep underground for a so-called bottom kill, a permanent seal that would complement a plug injected into the top of the well last week.

Allen has insisted for days that BP go ahead with the bottom kill, even though the top plug appeared to be holding. On Tuesday, though, he said testing still needs to be done on the well before a final decision is made.

"I'm not sure we know that ... I don't want to prejudge whether we are going to do it or not going to do it. It will be conditions-based."

He later assigned a "very low probability" to the bottom kill not being done, but then said: "We will let everybody know" if that changes.

BP Senior Vice President Kent Wells said it's "really a possibility" that cement engineers pumped in through the top went down into the reservoir, came back up and plugged the annulus, which is between the inner piping and the outer casing.

Allen also said officials were removing some boom that had been put out to catch oil in Florida, Alabama and Mississippi. He said the boom will be put it in storage and available for future use if necessary.

The delay from the storm came on the same day that anglers and tourism operators got some good news: Federal authorities announced that about 5,000 square miles of Gulf along Florida's Panhandle was reopened for commercial and recreational fishing.

Jane Lubchenco, administrator of the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration, said the expanse from east of Pensacola to Cape San Blas and extending south into the open Gulf was safe for fishing. No oil has been observed in those waters since July 3, though testing will continue.

The spill started with an April 20 explosion that sank the BP-leased drilling rig Deepwater Horizon and killed 11 workers.

More than 300 lawsuits filed in the aftermath against BP and other companies will be handled by a federal judge in New Orleans, a judicial panel said Tuesday.

An order issued Tuesday by the U.S. Judicial Panel on Multidistrict Litigation said 77 cases plus more than 200 potential "tag-along" actions will be transferred to U.S. District Judge Carl Barbier.

The judicial panel's order says the federal court based in New Orleans is the best place for the litigation because southeast Louisiana is the "geographic and psychological 'center of gravity'" for the cases.

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