

Panel: Gov't blocked scientists on spill estimate

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BP PLC offshore land negotiator Michael Beirne, right, testifies alongside his attorney Michael Monico during Deepwater Horizon joint investigation hearings held by the U.S. Coast Guard and the Bureau of Ocean Management Regulation and Enforcement in Metairie, La., Wednesday, Oct. 6, 2010. (AP Photo/Patrick Semansky, Pool)

(AP) -- The Obama administration blocked efforts by government scientists to tell the public just how bad the Gulf oil spill could become and committed other missteps that raised questions about its competence and candor during the crisis, according to a commission appointed by the president to investigate the disaster.

In documents released Wednesday, the national oil spill commission's staff describes "not an incidental public relations problem" by the White House in the wake of the April 20 accident.

Among other things, the report says, the administration made erroneous early estimates of the spill's size, and President Barack Obama's senior energy adviser went on national TV and mischaracterized a government analysis by saying it showed most of the oil was "gone." The analysis actually said it could still be there.

"By initially underestimating the amount of oil flow and then, at the end of the summer, appearing to underestimate the amount of oil remaining in the Gulf, the federal government created the impression that it was either not fully competent to handle the spill or not fully candid with the American people about the scope of the problem," the report says.

The administration disputed the commission findings, saying senior government officials "were clear with the public what the worst-case flow rate could be."

In a statement Wednesday, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration chief Jane Lubchenco and White House budget director Jeffrey Zients pointed out that in early May, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen told the public that the worst-case scenario could be more than 100,000 barrels a day, or 4.2 million gallons.

For the first time, the documents - which are preliminary findings by the panel's staff - show that the White House was directly involved in controlling the message as it struggled to convey that it, not BP, was in charge of responding to what eventually became the biggest offshore oil spill in U.S. history.

Citing interviews with government officials, the report reveals that in late April or early May, the White House budget office denied a request from NOAA to make public its worst-case estimate of how much oil could spew from the blown-out well. The Unified Command - the

government team in charge of the spill response - also was discussing the possibility of making the numbers public, the report says.

The report shows "the political process was in charge and science really does not have the role that was touted," said Christopher D'Elia, dean of environmental studies at Louisiana State University.

The White House budget office has traditionally been a clearinghouse for administration domestic policy. Why exactly the administration didn't want to emphasize the worst-case scenario is not made clear in the report.

However, Kenneth Baer, a spokesman for the Office of Management and Budget, said the budget office had concerns about the reliability of the NOAA estimates.

"The issue was the modeling, the science and the assumptions they were using to come up with their analysis. Not public relations or presentation," he said. "We offered NOAA suggestions of ways to improve their analysis, and they happily accepted it."

Jerry Miller, head of the White House science office's ocean subcommittee, told The Associated Press in an interview at a St. Petersburg, Fla., scientific conference on the oil spill that he didn't think the budget office censored NOAA.

"I would very much doubt that anyone would put restrictions on NOAA's ability to articulate factual information," Miller said.

The explosion in the Gulf of Mexico killed 11 workers, spewed 206 million gallons of oil from the damaged oil well, and sank the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig.

BP's drilling permit for the well originally estimated the worst-case scenario to be a leak of 6.8 million gallons per day. In late April, just after the spill began, the Coast Guard and NOAA received an updated worst-case estimate of 2.7 million to 4.6 million gallons per day.

While those figures were used as the basis for the government's response to the spill - they appeared on an internal Coast Guard situation report and on a dry-erase board in NOAA's Seattle war room - they were never announced to the public, according to the report.

However, they were, in fact, announced, as news stories from May 2 to May 5 show, though the figures received little attention at the time.

For more than a month after the explosion, government officials were telling the public that the well was releasing 210,000 gallons per day. In early August, in its final estimate of the spill's flow, the government said it was gushing 2.6 million gallons per day - close to the worst-case predictions.

The documents also criticize Carol Browner, director of the White House Office of Energy and Climate Change Policy, saying that during a series of morning-show appearances on Aug. 4, she misrepresented the findings of a federal analysis of where the oil went and incorrectly portrayed it as a scientific assessment that was peer-reviewed by inside and outside experts.

"I think it's also important to note that our scientists have done an initial assessment, and more than three-quarters of the oil is gone," Browner said on NBC's "Today" show.

But the analysis never said it was gone, according to the commission. It said it was dispersed, dissolved or evaporated - meaning it could still be there. And while NOAA administrator Jane Lubchenco was more

cautious in her remarks at a news conference at the White House later that day, the commission staff accuses the two senior officials of contributing to the perception that the government's findings were more exact than they actually were.

Florida State University professor Ian MacDonald, who has repeatedly clashed with NOAA and the Coast Guard over the size of the spill, the existence of underwater plumes and oil in the sea floor, said he felt gratified by the report.

From the beginning, there was "a contradiction between discoveries and concerns by academic scientists and statements by NOAA," MacDonald said in an interview with the AP at the oil spill conference.

And he said it is still going on. MacDonald and Georgia Tech scientist Joseph Montoya said NOAA is at it again with statements saying there is no oil in ocean floor sediments. A University of Georgia science cruise, which Montoya was on, found ample evidence of oil on the Gulf floor.

More information: National Oil Spill Commission:
<http://www.oilspillcommission.gov>

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