

BP may re-drill near Gulf of Mexico oil well site

7 August 2010, by Erica Berenstein



A painting condemning energy giant BP is seen outside a shop in Larose, Louisiana. The Gulf of Mexico oil spill is the largest environmental disaster in US history and is threatening the entire region's way of life, fueling widespread outrage among residents.

BP has shrugged off a potential public relations hit when the energy giant said it may drill a new well in the Gulf of Mexico reservoir which fed one of the world's worst oil spills.

BP is on the hook for tens of billions of dollars in fines and clean-up and compensation costs, so tapping into the rich field deep under the seabed might well be worth it.

"Clearly there's lots of oil and gas there and we'll have to think about what to do with that at some point," Doug Suttles, BP's chief operating officer, told reporters.

Asked whether BP would consider donating the proceeds from the sale of any oil from the reservoir or selling the rights to another oil company, Suttles said "we just haven't thought about that."

"What we've been focused on is the response right now. We haven't even thought about what we'd do with this reservoir and this field someday."

He declined, however, to say that BP would leave the rich reservoir alone out of sensitivity to those affected by the spill, prompted by a deadly August 20 explosion on an offshore drilling rig that killed 11 workers.

"What we've stated is the original well that had the blowout and the relief wells will be abandoned," Suttles explained.

BP later released a statement appearing to try to downplay his remarks, saying "BP's present focus is entirely on the response effort in the [Gulf of Mexico](#) and the future use of the reservoir is not currently under consideration."

Yet it too failed to say whether the Macondo reservoir would be a source of any further BP development.

With the runaway well finally plugged and work underway to "kill" it by injecting mud and cement in through a relief well, public attention is shifting away from the months-long disaster.

But officials cautioned there is still a huge clean-up job and experts warned that the impact of the spill could be felt for years, or even decades, to come.

More than 11 million feet (3.3 million meters) of protective boom is set to be collected and either disposed of or cleaned and stored for future use.

But fears about the effects of the oil remain, particularly as figures show that only eight percent of the crude that gushed into the sea was removed through burning and skimming.

While the massive slick which once spread for hundreds of miles has mostly dissolved or dispersed, according to the US government and BP, tiny droplets of oil are still toxic to the marine life which once supported a multi-billion-dollar commercial and recreational fishing industry.

The good news is that the oil appears to be biodegrading rapidly. The problem is there is simply so much out there. (c) 2010 AFP

At 4.9 million barrels -- or enough oil to fill 311 Olympic-sized swimming pools -- the disaster is the biggest maritime spill on record.

"It's a race between the microbes eating it and everything else being exposed to it," said Larry McKinney, executive director of the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies.

"Microbial action comes at a cost. They're organisms. They use oxygen."

The Gulf was already under stress from coastal erosion and a massive "dead zone" created by agricultural runoff from the Mississippi River that feeds algae, which sucks oxygen out of the water.

"We will likely have a pretty severe impact," McKinney told AFP, adding that the real concern is that the spill could be the final tipping point for an already stressed ecosystem.

"You can only be knocked down so many times before you can't get back up again."

Yet people across the Gulf Coast could not help but breathe a sigh of relief that the well is finally, nearly, dead.

"Now that it has been capped, we're seeing buyers creep back into the market," said Mary Anne Windes, a real estate broker in Destin, Florida who also helps run her family's charter fishing business.

But there's still a "perception that this place has been ruined forever."

After months of frantic efforts to cap the well, officials are now waiting for the cement to dry in the well before they can begin the final "kill" procedure: cutting the well off from the bottom with a relief well and entombing it in mud and cement.

BP said mid-August is the most likely date that the first of two relief wells being drilled will intercept the Macondo well.

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