

Extra Feature Story

Gulf Oil Spill Could Be Most Damaging in History

May 4, 2010

An explosion at an oil drilling platform in the Gulf of Mexico off the U.S. coast created a leak that is threatening wildlife, beaches and ecosystems near the mouth of the Mississippi River.

An estimated 210,000 gallons of thick black crude oil from holes drilled into the ocean bed are leaking into Gulf waters every day. The oil has hit the shores in some parts of Louisiana and shrimp fishing has been suspended.

President Obama called the leak "a potentially unprecedented environmental disaster" while some environmental experts worry that 1,000 miles of marshes and beaches are at risk of oil contamination, ruining hopes of economic recovery in the region.

British Petroleum, also known as BP, the company that was leasing the damaged oil drilling rig, has stated that they did not cause the explosion but are responsible for the oil cleanup.

Attempts at clean up as oil hits the coast

BP and the government are using many new, largely untested techniques to try to clean up the oil spill. BP Chief Operating Officer Doug Suttles said the company is open to all possible solutions and will "take help from anyone" in the cleanup effort.

Using a method known as an in-situ burn, workers attempted to set aflame large sections of the slick in a controlled way by gathering oil in 500-foot fireproof booms, or floating barriers, and bringing it to a certain thickness before burning it. High winds and rain thwarted the many attempts to burn the oil last week but with clear weather forecast, officials hope to conduct more burns in the coming days.

Rear Adm. Mary E. Landry, the local federal coordinator for the Gulf effort, said that burns eliminate "50 to 95 percent of oil collected in a fire boom."

Once burned, the oil leaves a "waxy residue" that must be skimmed from the surface so as not to disrupt wildlife. Burning also creates a lot of smoke that can damage local wildlife, but experts say birds can navigate around wildfire easier than oil slicks.

In the meantime, officials are using underwater robots to try to cap the leaks. BP also plans to drop three concrete and steel boxes on to the leaking pipe. Weighing 74 tons each, the boxes would contain the oil, allowing it to be piped to the surface. Another idea is to drill a so-called relief well into the ocean floor, but that would take up to three months.

Fish, birds, alligators and seafood industry threatened

Shorebirds are among the most vulnerable animals in an oil spill, since the crude oil coats their feathers, disabling their natural protection against extreme cold and heat. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials are considering using large cannons to scare birds away from the coastline and keep them from the oil's path.

Other wetland wildlife species such as alligators and turtles are also in danger. A total of 31 dead turtles have washed ashore since the slick. Most were Loggerheads, Leatherheads and Kemp's Ridley – some of the most critically endangered species of sea turtle in the Gulf.

Fishermen are especially concerned: Gulf coast waters are rich fishing grounds teeming with shrimp, crabs and other staples of the seafood industry.

Officials declared an emergency shrimp harvest so fishermen could gather as much shrimp as possible before the oil arrived. However, shrimpers are anticipating massive losses and have filed a class-action (group) lawsuit against BP to recover their lost income.

Over 1,000 out of work local fisherman are now being trained by BP and local fire officials to work on shore cleanup in Venice, Louisiana.

"Either the seafood industry or the oil industry — that's the only jobs down here, so I guess I'm trying to move from seafood to oil today," said fisherman Bernel Prout. BP has said it will hire as many local residents as possible to clean the beaches and distribute booms through the surrounding marshes and waterways.

Offshore drilling policies questioned

The Gulf oil spill is drawing public scrutiny in light of President Obama's recent announcement that he would lift a 20-year ban on oil drilling off the U.S. Atlantic coast. In a reversal of his campaign stance against offshore drilling, the president said that tapping domestic oil while looking for alternative energy solutions is the best way to meet America's energy demands.

But, following the spill, White House senior advisor David Axelrod said that all new offshore drilling efforts will be suspended until the slick has been cleaned up and its cause has been thoroughly investigated.

Many environmental groups and critics of offshore drilling are calling on the president to halt all drilling until better safeguards have been put in place to prevent future spills. There are currently 90 operating rigs in U.S. Gulf waters, searching for oil and natural gas.

Spill compared to Exxon Valdez

The largest oil spill to date in U.S. waters was in March 1989, when the massive oil tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground in the waters of Prince William Sound off the Alaska coast, spilling about 11 million gallons of oil. Alaskan wildlife and shoreline ecosystems suffered greatly as a result.

Completely cleaning up the Exxon spill took several years; shoreline cleanup began in April 1989 through September 1989, and the effort continued in the summers of 1990 and 1991.

To eclipse the volume of oil spilled by Exxon Valdez, the Gulf oil leak would have to continue flowing at its current rate until about the third week of June.

- Compiled by Lizzy Berryman for NewsHour Extra

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