

BP jams gulf well with drilling mud

Bettina Boxall, Margot Roosevelt and Louis Sahagun, Los Angeles Times, 8-5-10

BP's long and halting effort to bring an end to the Gulf of Mexico disaster crossed a key threshold Wednesday when the company packed its ruptured well full of heavy drilling mud, wresting control more than three months after the blowout unleashed one of the world's largest oil spills.

But officials were not ready to declare dead the renegade offshore well, and many in the gulf region were not about to celebrate.

"We have reached a static condition in the well that allows us to have high confidence that there will be no oil leaking into the environment," retired Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen, the government's point man on the spill, said at a White House news briefing. He called it "a very significant step."

Later Wednesday, Allen gave BP the go-ahead to pump cement into the well through the top. But he continued to emphasize that the battle to permanently seal the well would not be over until one of two relief wells has bored into it sometime in mid-August.

"Based on the successful completion of the static-kill procedure and a positive evaluation of the test results, I have authorized BP to cement its damaged well," Allen said in a statement. "I made it clear that implementation of this procedure shall in no way delay the completion of the relief well."

BP announced Wednesday's achievement as the government released a report indicating that roughly half of the oil released during the disaster has evaporated, dissolved or was burned, skimmed or collected.

At the White House, officials hailed what they called a "consequential day," but cautioned that it was the end of only one phase in a decades-long recovery effort. After President Obama was briefed on developments, "he thanked me for his birthday present," joked Carol Browner, Obama's energy and climate change assistant.

As BP declared progress, shrimpers, crabbers and sport fishing guides whose livelihoods were put on hold by the Deepwater Horizon disaster complained about cleanup work left undone and worried about the spill's ongoing effects.

"If you want to know what's really going on, look at how wildlife is reacting — no one knows the environment better than they do," said Jessica Taylor, an Audubon Society volunteer in the southeastern Louisiana fishing community of Venice, which turned into a hub for Coast Guard and BP cleanup vessels during the spill.

Over the last two days, she said, at least eight dead and dying birds — sanderlings, pelicans and sea gulls — have turned up on local beaches and in coastal waters.

"No one is saying that it's not a threat anymore," Jane Lubchenco, administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA, said at the White House. "I think the common view of most of the scientists inside and outside government is that the effects of this spill will likely linger for decades."

More than 200 million gallons of oil were released by the deep-sea well 50 miles off the Louisiana coast before it was corked with a huge mechanical cap last month.

In trying to figure out where all the oil went, federal scientists concluded that a quarter of it was skimmed, burned or collected and funneled to oil processing ships. Another 25% evaporated or dissolved. About 24% was

dispersed into droplets, either naturally or by chemical dispersants that were extensively used to break up the spill. The rest, 26%, is "either on or just below the surface as light sheen and weathered tar balls; has washed ashore or been collected from the shore; or is buried in sand and sediments," the report concluded.

Gulf scientists outside the government were skeptical of the analysis.

"There is no way enough information has been collected so far to get an accurate assessment" of the precise fate of all the oil released by the busted well, said Jim Cowan, an oceanography professor at Louisiana State University. "It looks like a nice neat diagram, but I have no confidence in it whatsoever."

Since the April 20 Deepwater Horizon rig explosion, NOAA's initial take on the scope of the disaster has proven too optimistic. The agency at first pegged the BP leak at 5,000 barrels a day and disputed reports of underwater oil plumes. It later confirmed the sub-sea plumes and this week said that at its peak, the damaged well poured 62,000 barrels of oil into the gulf each day.

"This is still an unfolding eco-toxicological experiment," said Ronald J. Kendall, director of Texas Tech University's Institute of Environmental and Human Health. "Even if all the oil were gone tomorrow, the effects of the spill on species such as sea turtles, bluefin tuna and sperm whales may take years to understand."

"The Kemp's Ridley turtles lay their eggs and the females don't return to the coast for as long as 10 years," he added. "The males never come back. We won't know for years how the population is affected. The damage could well be already done."

"It is a little soon to start dancing a jig," said Jackie Savitz, a marine biologist with Oceana, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit. "The bottom line is at least 50% of what got into the water is still there, just based on this report."

At a congressional hearing Wednesday, lawmakers on Capitol Hill also warned of the need to monitor the lingering effects of the widespread use of chemical dispersants. BP has stopped applying the dispersants, which were sprayed on the ocean surface and also released near the leaking well nearly a mile under the water to break up the oil and keep it from washing ashore.

"The subsurface application of the dispersants is why we are seeing less oil on the surface of the gulf than we expected," Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.) said at a Senate Environment and Public Works Committee hearing. "However, it is unclear if this will limit the damage or cause even greater harm."

BP's success in stopping up the well with mud didn't wipe away the gloom that has enveloped Venice, a drowsy southeastern Louisiana fishing community of about 2,700 people nestled among bayou groves and oil refineries.

It "can't overcome the atmosphere of uncertainty lingering out at sea," said Matt O'Brian, owner of a shrimp and crab processing dock. "Will there even be a market for Louisiana seafood? What is the impact on crabs and shrimp over the long haul? It's impossible to know how this thing is ultimately going to play out."

Todd Goodman, a Plaquemines Parish staffer who runs a trailer park as a sideline, agreed.

"There is enormous pressure on BP to claim that everything is fine now. But what scares me and a lot of other folks around here is the notion that everybody — BP, the Coast Guard, law enforcement, cleanup crews — will suddenly pull up stakes and leave," Goodman said. "Then, two months later — boom! — more oil washes up on us."