

BP managers had little experience supervising Deepwater Horizon

Rong-Gong Lin II, Los Angeles Times, 8-27-10

HOUSTON -- Five high-ranking BP officials with authority over drilling by the Deepwater Horizon were relatively new to their jobs when the rig exploded April 20, according to testimony Thursday at a federal hearing.

“So, we have five individuals there who have less than six months of experience in the chain of command that we have with this particular incident,” investigator Jason Mathews said at a joint U.S. Coast Guard-Interior Department hearing probing the cause of the worst offshore oil spill in U.S. history.

“Do you think the management of the personnel changes had any role in the Deepwater Horizon incident?” Mathews asked BP drilling and completions operations manager David Sims.

“No,” said Sims, who had been on the job for 18 days.

The course of questioning Thursday showed that investigators harbor doubts about the quality of BP’s personnel decisions, both aboard the rig and in its Houston-based offices. Mathews questioned whether a tour given to Sims and other VIPs hours before the explosion interfered with the rig’s operations. He questioned whether their presence came at the expense of workers who had been scheduled to do a critical acoustic test, similar to a sonogram, to confirm the integrity of the cement seal on the well.

The team was transferred off the rig without completing the test, which could have detected flaws in the cement seal. The seal is important to prevent dangerous bubbles of natural gas from leaking into the well and potentially rising up to the rig.

Sims said he didn’t know whether personnel were moved off the rig to accommodate the VIPs. Sims was on the bridge at the time of the explosion and testified that it took “a few minutes” between the time he first realized something was wrong — vibrations probably caused by the first explosion — and an attempt to complete an emergency disconnection of the rig from the well, which failed.

“What took so long to activate the [emergency disconnect system]?” Mathews asked.

“I don’t know, specifically,” Sims said. “I was trying to stay out of the marine crew’s way and try to let them handle the situation.”

Sims said there was “chaos” on the bridge, but then quickly added that chaos was “probably too strong of a word.”

Among the five senior BP officials who had less than six months of experience in their roles supervising the drilling operation was well-site leader Robert Kaluza, who had been on his job for four days. Kaluza’s supervisor was John Guide, who in turn was supervised by drilling manager David Sims, who had been on the job for just 18 days.

Sims was supervised by David Rich, a drilling leader who had been doing his job for five months. Rich’s boss was a BP vice president, Pat O’Bryan, who was in his job for three or four months. A fifth person who recently came into his job was Greg Walz, a drilling engineering team leader who had been on the job for about a month.