

BP official -- effort to shut Gulf well was 'late'

Harry R. Weber, Associated Press, 12-8-10

HOUSTON -- Workers on the doomed Gulf of Mexico oil rig were distracted by multiple activities going on simultaneously and didn't try to shut the well until 49 minutes after potentially explosive gas particles began flowing in, a BP vice president told a federal investigative panel Wednesday.

Steve Robinson, who led the team that questioned the wellsite leaders as part of BP PLC's internal probe, said at hearings in Houston that the actions were late. He said that by the time the crew reacted, the hydrocarbons were already in the riser. He said they couldn't be contained, only diverted.

An explosion occurred just minutes later, killing 11 workers and leading to more than 200 million gallons of oil spewing from BP's well a mile beneath the sea, according to government estimates.

The joint U.S. Coast Guard-Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement panel is nearing the final stretch in its quest to assign blame for the April 20 disaster.

This is the panel's sixth series of hearings, and at least one more is expected before the panel issues its report, which is due by March 27. The panel is still awaiting the results of forensic testing on a key piece of evidence - the blowout preventer that failed to stop the spill. Investigators are analyzing it at a NASA facility in New Orleans.

BP has previously acknowledged that its engineers and employees of Transocean misinterpreted a pressure test of the well's integrity before the explosion. It also previously blamed employees on the rig from both companies for failing to respond to other warning signs that the well was in danger of blowing out.

Robinson also testified that a technician for a unit of Halliburton who was responsible for monitoring gas levels told BP's internal investigators he never left his post in the hours before the blast. However, the technician, Joseph Keith, testified before the federal panel Tuesday that he left his post around 9 p.m. for about 10 minutes to grab some coffee, smoke a cigarette and use the restroom. Robinson said that if that is true, there could have been a gap in monitoring during a critical time.

Investigators appear now to be trying to draw a link between the distractions on the rig, the time it took to respond and the consequences.

The co-chairman of a separate presidential commission on the Gulf oil spill said Wednesday during a speech to oil industry lawyers in New Orleans that there is widespread belief that "breathhtakingly inept" mistakes by BP, Halliburton and Transocean led to the disaster. William Reilly also said the industry must do a much better job of regulating itself.

BP declined to comment on the remarks, while Transocean said in a statement that BP was in charge of the well design and construction. Halliburton said it remains confident that all the work it performed with respect to BP's well was completed in accordance with BP's specifications and instructions.

Robinson, vice president of wells for BP's Alaska business, told the USCG-BOEMRE panel he was asked on April 25 to join BP's investigation team looking into the disaster. He participated in interviews, including the questioning of BP's three well site leaders who were on the Deepwater Horizon at the time of the blast.

Robinson said that as part of its probe BP used data and other information to create models of what occurred on the rig. He said those models show that the well began to flow at 8:52 p.m., but it wasn't until 9:41 p.m. that there were any well-control responses by the crew.

"I believe it was late," Robinson said.

Previous testimony has centered on the distractions on the rig in the hours before the blast. There was a lot of mud being moved around and other rig activities going on at the same time.

Meanwhile, at the New Orleans gathering of industry lawyers, the head of the federal agency that regulates offshore oil drilling said the government is not trying to slow the permitting of drilling and denies the existence of what some in the industry call a "de facto moratorium" on drilling.

Michael Bromwich, head of the Bureau of Ocean Energy, Management, Regulation and Enforcement, said the agency is working to issue permits under new safety regulations. He said new guidance to help the industry comply with the regulations could be issued later this week.

The federal government imposed a moratorium after the BP-leased rig exploded. The moratorium was lifted in October. Transocean owned the rig, while BP was the majority owner of the blown-out well. Halliburton was the cementer.