

Oil Islands Shown Safe, Sound

Jonathan Van Dyke, Long Beach Grunion Gazette, 7-1-10

The U.S. Department of Energy estimates that the offshore oil leak that is currently active off the Gulf Coast emits 1,470,000 gallons a day.

As residents peer out into Long Beach's own ocean water, they will see four oil islands that are working the Wilmington Oil Field, the fourth largest oil formation within the continental U.S.

Officials say what's happening on the Gulf Coast cannot, and will not, occur here.

"It won't," said Chris Garner, director of Long Beach's Gas and Oil Department. "It's like night and day in operations."

More than 1,900 wells have been drilled on the Wilmington Field, 1,000 of which are active and about 700 that are "producer wells." The off-shore operation produces close to 1,176,000 gallons a day (28,000 barrels), according to William McFarland.

McFarland is the human resources manager for Oxy Long Beach, Inc., the day-to-day operator of the four islands in partnership with the city. He and his employers are very aware of what is at stake.

"Obviously with the disaster in the Gulf, there's a heightened awareness of this (operation)," he said.

However, as Garner and McFarland said, this is not traditional offshore drilling.

"We're operating from a solid ground island construction, rather than an offshore platform, which are subject to issues," Garner said.

"The local oil won't naturally flow, so if something breaks, it's not pressurized near to the extent of what's happening in the Gulf."

The amount that comes out also would be significantly different, McFarland said.

While the oil from the Gulf Coast comes from a single well, it takes the entire Wilmington Field to produce that amount. Also, he added, what Oxy's crews are pressurizing comes up 97% water.

"Our reservoirs are very low pressure — we have no flowing wells," he said.

"We have to put pumps down to get fluid to the surface. It's really like a land operation."

Oxy does routine inspections of any piping and plans upgrades and repairs accordingly, McFarland said.

"In the event something were to happen — which in 45 years of operation here, we've never had a pipeline issue — we train on oil spill response," he said.

The islands themselves have been designed to blend into the harbor vista.

Those islands closest to the city have urban architecture that can be decorated.

For example, the island named “White” has a nighttime waterfall and its drilling rig is outfitted to look like a condominium building.

Much of that architecture serves a purpose too, McFarland said, not only keeping the equipment from view, but also dampening noise from the loud machinery.

That effort to not be seen or heard — for good or for bad — is important, officials said. Groups contacted had not heard much about the operations.

“Whenever you have any kind of industrious activity in a marine habitat, it can be dangerous,” said Seamus Ian Innes, secretary of Long Beach’s Surfrider chapter.

“The one’s that we have right here are about the safest offshore operation you can get.”

Admittedly, the operation is a bit of an unknown quantity, aside from its potential impact or lack thereof with the city’s breakwater issues, Innes said.

“It’s better than some of the other operations,” he said.

“If you’re going to have a hazardous activity in your backyard, you want the safest you can get.”

The chapter nationally is trying to get a moratorium on all offshore drilling, he added.

Sarah Sikich, coastal resource director of Heal the Bay, said she had not heard too much about the operations in Long Beach.

Her organization’s concerns were very much with protecting the ocean waters and the wildlife habitats within in it, she said.

“Heal the Bay is opposed to any offshore drilling in California, and we’re deeply concerned with the regulatory system that is in place to manage it,” Sikich said.

In regards to Long Beach’s situation, she said her organization did not have a specifically formulated opinion.

Officials said that the islands were prepared for just about anything, including natural disaster, and that no major spills have been reported.

“We also have containment, so in the event we’re to lose tankage — earthquake or whatever — we could maintain all the fluid on the location without any of it going into the water,” McFarland said, noting the islands’ design that flows everything back into itself.

According to Garner, people can’t look at the Wilmington Field in the same way as the Gulf Coast.

“The key things are that it is a much smaller volume and the much, much shallower water it’s taking place in,” he said.

Both officials were adamant that a major spill has never occurred. When pressed on what a minor spill was,

Garner said, “You’re talking less than a gallon, not even oil, but mostly byproducts.”

Currently, Marine Spill Response Corporation — one of two federally licensed oil spill remediation contractors — is contracted for any potential disaster.

Regular remediation and disaster drills are conducted as well, Garner said.

Mayor Bob Foster, who recently went to the Gulf to see the recovery operation, also has kept an open dialogue with Garner, and they may soon conduct a summit of sorts with all the major oil players in the region, he added.

“We’re very aware that it’s our responsibility to make sure our operation is run with every safety factor you could possibly think of,” McFarland said.