

## Oil rig missed inspections, records show

*Nearly a third of required checks weren't conducted by federal inspectors in the months before the deadly explosion, Interior documents show. The last safety violation was flagged in 2007.*

**Bettina Boxall and Jim Tankersley, Los Angeles Times, 6-12-10**

Federal inspectors failed to conduct nearly a third of required inspections on the Deepwater Horizon rig in the 28 months before it exploded and sank in the Gulf of Mexico, according to government records.

The inspections that were carried out by the Minerals Management Service found no sign of trouble on BP's Deepwater Horizon drilling rig, according to documents posted Friday on the Interior Department's website.

MMS reports, including one dated three weeks before the deadly April 20 explosion, indicate that the rig's blowout preventer was functioning properly, and they make no mention of any persistent problems with surges of natural gas, or "kicks," flowing up through the well and disrupting drilling.

Although the cause of the disaster remains under investigation, experts have blamed the explosion on a natural gas surge. A prominent outside investigator, UC Berkeley engineering professor Robert Bea, said last month that rig workers told him the Deepwater Horizon had battled repeated kicks in the weeks before its sinking. MMS inspectors noted the presence of a kick in October 2008, but none later.

"It appears that the Deepwater Horizon experienced dangerous gas 'kicks' before the April 20 disaster," said David Pettit, a senior attorney and drilling expert for the Natural Resources Defense Council, who reviewed the inspection reports Friday. "It is hard to understand why MMS did not learn about this potentially deadly problem" before the explosion.

Despite federal regulations mandating that inspections be done monthly, the rig operation was only inspected three times over the first four months of this year; nine times in 2009 and six times in 2008. Officials at the Interior Department, which houses MMS, say rigs can miss inspections because they're on the move or because of weather conditions.

Interior officials declined to answer questions about the documents and released a statement saying that several investigations underway "have been charged with looking at all the questions related to the Deepwater Horizon explosion and BP oil spill. These questions will be best addressed in the context of those investigations."

The documents indicate that the last time the Horizon was flagged for a safety violation was in 2007, when an inspector found that a pressure washer was not properly grounded on the rig floor. Correspondence posted along with the reports show that BP unsuccessfully fought that citation.

A summary of the safety reports, also posted online, states that the Horizon was flagged three times for safety in 2002 and once in 2003 for an unspecified "pollution event."

Minerals Management has for years been criticized for lax oversight of the oil and gas industry. Several inspector general reports have cited ethical lapses on the part of agency employees, including taking gifts and negotiating jobs with the companies they regulated.

President Obama, who is planning his fourth visit to the gulf, on Friday spread some of the blame to Congress.

"I think it's fair to say, if six months ago, before this spill had happened, I had gone up to Congress and I had said, 'We need to crack down a lot harder on oil companies and we need to spend more money on technology to respond in case of a catastrophic spill,' there are folks up there, who will not be named, who would have said, 'This is classic, big-government overregulation and wasteful spending,'" Obama said in an interview with Politico.

In the wake of Thursday's release of new estimates of the leak's size, the government's spill commander said Friday that BP won't be able capture most of the flow for several more weeks.

A containment cap is now funneling a little more than 15,000 barrels a day of oil from the damaged well on the gulf floor to the processing ship Enterprise, less than half the amount that may be spurting from the well head, according to the new figures.

More ships and equipment are on their way to the spill site off the Louisiana coast. But Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen said it won't be until late this month or early July that BP will have the ability to collect all the crude gushing from the deep-sea well.

The updated flow figures doubled earlier estimates, underscoring the spill's potential for harming the gulf environment and its 3,000-mile coastline.

"We may be talking about more beaches and more wetlands [affected] and more of an oil legacy in our ocean," said Jacqueline Savitz, senior campaign director for Oceana, an international conservation organization. "Toxicity depends on the dose. The more there is equates to a greater amount of exposure to marine life."

George Crozier, executive director of the Dauphin Island Sea Lab, said he is particularly concerned about the amount of carbon — a major component of oil — the spill is dumping into gulf waters. The more carbon, the more oil-consuming microbes in the sea will deplete oxygen. Extremely low oxygen levels can create dead zones devoid of marine life.

Recent samples from an offshore area his lab has monitored for five years are showing the lowest levels of oxygen he has seen there, Crozier said. While he can't definitively link the oxygen plunge to the massive slick drifting in the gulf, Crozier said there was "presumptive evidence" that it was due to the BP spill.

This week, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration confirmed that light clouds of dispersed oil from the mile-deep leak are floating beneath the surface. University research ships have detected below-normal oxygen levels in and near the plumes.

Since the earliest leak estimates of 1,000 and then 5,000 barrels were made soon after the Deepwater Horizon rig explosion, some scientists have said the flow was likely much higher. In late May, a government-appointed scientific team asked to analyze video feeds of the leak pegged the flow at 12,000 to 19,000 barrels. After more study, the team this week raised those figures to a range of 20,000 to 40,000 barrels, or 840,000 to 1.7 million gallons, a day.

The higher figure far exceeds the combined capacity of the Enterprise and a platform vessel that is scheduled to join the ship next week. Together the two should be able to process and burn off about 28,000 barrels daily, Allen said.

In the meantime, BP is planning over the next few weeks to replace the containment cap that is capturing some of the well flow with a tighter device that may be able to collect virtually all of the oil gusher. The new apparatus, connected to a flexible pipe system designed to withstand hurricane-strength storms, would funnel the oil to ships now headed for the spill.

They include the Loch Rannoch, a large shuttle tanker on its way from the North Sea, where it's used to transport oil from offshore rigs to northern Scotland.

"[It] is an incremental build-out of capacity, including bringing in production facilities and shuttle tankers that are not normally used in the Gulf of Mexico," Allen said.

Friday, a supply vessel in the BP operation damaged a natural gas pipe as it was mooring at a gas platform near Cocodrie, La. The accident caused a gas leak, which was quickly shut off by a platform worker, according to the Coast Guard.

Three dozen people on the vessel were transported to shore and treated. By Friday evening, all of them had recovered, a Coast Guard spokesman said.