

Newest oil spill total bad news for BP, wildlife

Brian Skoloff and Harry R. Weber, Associated Press, 6-12-10

GRAND ISLE, La. — The astonishing news that the oil leak at the bottom of the sea may be twice as big as previously thought could have major repercussions for both the environment and BP's financial health, killing more marine life and dramatically increasing the amount the company must pay in fines and damages.

Scientists now say the blown-out well could have been spewing as much as 2 million gallons of crude a day before a cut-and-cap maneuver started capturing some of the flow, meaning more than 100 million gallons may have leaked into the Gulf of Mexico since the start of the disaster in April. That is more than nine times the size of the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster, previously the worst oil spill in U.S. history.

The larger estimates, while still preliminary and considered a worst-case scenario, could contribute to breathtaking liabilities against BP. Penalties can be levied against the company under a variety of environmental protection laws, including fines of up to \$1,100 under the Clean Water Act for each barrel of oil spilled.

Based on the maximum amount of oil possibly spilled to date, that would translate to a potential civil fine for simple discharge alone of \$2.8 billion. If BP were found to have committed gross negligence or willful misconduct, the civil fine could be up to \$4,300 per barrel, or up to \$11.1 billion.

"It's going to blow the record books up," said Eric Schaeffer, who led the Environmental Protection Agency's enforcement office from 1997 to 2002.

A larger spill also could lead to increased environmental hazards, with shrimp, crabs and fish such as marlin and swordfish especially hard hit.

"Certainly if there are greater volumes of oil than were originally estimated, that doesn't bode well," said Jim Franks, a fisheries biologist at the University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast Research Laboratory. "Do we expect twice the impact? I don't know how to judge that, but that much more oil could not be good at all for fish and wildlife resources. I would anticipate far-reaching impacts."

Days after the spill began, government officials told the public the ruptured well a mile below the Gulf was leaking 42,000 gallons a day. Then, officials said it was actually five times bigger. That estimate didn't last long either. The new estimates are based on spillcam video as well as such things as satellite, sonar and pressure readings.

The lead scientist in the effort said the most credible range at the moment is between 840,000 gallons and 1.68 million gallons a day.

Another part of the equation is how much more oil started to leak last week after the riser pipe was cut, a step that BP and government officials said could increase the flow by 20 percent. The pipe cut was necessary to install a cap over the well; the cap has captured an estimated 4 million gallons so far.

If the higher-end estimates prove accurate, the leak amounts to an Exxon Valdez every five days or so. At that rate, in just over three weeks from now it will eclipse the worst oil spill in peacetime history, the 1979 Ixtoc disaster in Mexico, which took 10 months to belch out 140 million gallons of oil into the Gulf.

And there's more bad news. The oil gushing from the Gulf contains large amounts of natural gas. Samantha Joye, a professor of marine sciences at the University of Georgia, said that can contribute significantly to oxygen levels plummeting in the water as microbes eat the methane clouds.