

Obama launches BP oil spill offensive

President Obama is touring the Gulf coast this week, will give a prime-time Oval Office address Tuesday, and hosts BP officials at the White House Wednesday

Linda Feldmann, Christian Science Monitor, 6-14-10

WASHINGTON -- Nearly two months into the BP oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, President Obama is making his most concerted effort yet to project the kind of can-do spirit that got him elected in 2008.

Mr. Obama touched down in Gulfport, Miss., Monday morning, the first of several stops along the Gulf coast for meetings with local officials, residents, and the media over the next two days. Tuesday evening, the president will deliver his first-ever primetime address from the Oval Office. And on Wednesday, he and administration officials will meet with BP execs at the White House.

Obama has taken a drubbing for appearing behind the curve in his administration's response to the worst environmental disaster in US history. Now, as scenes of an expanding slick across the Gulf, oil-drenched animals, and tar balls on beaches blanket the airwaves, Obama faces as big a public perception challenge as any since taking office. Can he recover?

"I think he can," says Julian Zelizer, a professor of history and public affairs at Princeton University. "It becomes more difficult as time goes on, because at a certain point any effort to be more assertive looks like he's trying to recover from failure, rather than doing it for genuine reasons. But if he can lay out a program that brings the leak to an end, especially in the modern media age, he can change the score."

That is no small task. In his Oval Office address Tuesday, Obama will focus not only on the BP disaster but the future of energy policy.

"We're at kind of an inflection point in this saga because we now know ... essentially what we can do and what we can't do in terms of collecting oil and what lies ahead in the next few months," senior Obama aide David Axelrod said on NBC's "Meet the Press" Sunday. "And he wants to lay out the steps that we're going to take from here to get through this crisis."

Obama plans to touch on five points in his remarks, according to published reports:

- A plan to legally force BP to set aside funds in an independently administered escrow account to cover claims by businesses and individuals.
- An expanded containment strategy to capture as much leaking oil as possible. So far, 120,000 barrels of oil have been collected, or about 15,000 barrels a day, since the system was put in place.
- A plan to restore the Gulf to a condition better than it was before the BP-leased oil rig exploded and sank on April 20.
- Reforms at the Interior Department to improve regulation of offshore oil drilling.
- A renewed push for energy legislation that reduces dependence on fossil fuels.

After arriving in Gulfport, Miss., Obama met for more than an hour with the governors of Mississippi and Louisiana, in addition to state and local officials. The president told the group that more skimmers and better communication were needed. Obama also put out word that folks who want to help the Gulf coast should come down and spend tourist dollars.

"Here in Mississippi – but it's true in Florida, it's true in Alabama, and it's true in portions of Louisiana – there's still a lot of opportunity for visitors to come down here, a lot of beaches that are not yet affected or will not be affected," Obama said. "And we just want to make sure that people who have travel plans down to the Gulf area remain mindful of that, because if people want to know what can they do to help folks down here, one of the best ways to help is to come down here and enjoy the outstanding hospitality."

Also on Monday, BP announced a plan to increase the amount of oil it is capturing to between 40,000 and 53,000 barrels a day by the end of June, and 60,000-80,000 per day by mid-July. The Obama administration had set a 48-hour deadline on Saturday requiring BP to ramp up its oil collection, after estimates of the out-flow of oil from the deep-sea well were dramatically increased.