Measuring The Oil Spill: Spin Vs. Science

by NPR Staff

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Oceanography professor Ian MacDonald was among a group of scientists that found the amount of oil escaping from the spill in the Gulf is much higher than BP and the government estimated. Host Liane Hansen talks to MacDonald about why the numbers were so different and the importance of taking accurate measurements.

LIANE HANSEN, host:

Joining us now from Tallahassee, Florida is Ian MacDonald, a professor of oceanography at Florida State University. He and other scientists have conducted their own research into how much oil is escaping into the Gulf. Good morning, Professor MacDonald.

Professor IAN MACDONALD (Department of Oceanography, Florida State University): Good morning, Liane.

HANSEN: What are some of your findings?

Professor MACDONALD: Well, we separately examined the satellite images of the oil slick, of which there are very many, and the video showing the discharge of oil from the broken well. And we independently concluded that there's between 40,000 and 100,000 barrels of oil escaping from the well, per day. And thats actually pretty close to BP's worst case scenario. We think the worst case scenario has been in effect all along.

HANSEN: But why are the numbers that BP and the government putting out so different?

Professor MACDONALD: Well, BP is obviously spinning this story. The government formed a Flow Rate Task Force, or Flow Rate Technical Team, which was mandated to produce better numbers by last night. They did not deliver those numbers, however. They failed to meet their deadline. BP was supposed to furnish substantial information to them - technical drawings and so forth. It's not clear whether BP actually did that. There's a lot of foot dragging here.

HANSEN: In this weekend's New York Times, you wrote an op-ed piece that talked about the need for accurate, up to date measurements of a spill like this, both now and in future disasters. Why is that so important?

Professor MACDONALD: Well, right now we need good numbers to know how well the different methods of plugging the well are succeeding. And the responders on the beaches need to know how much oil is coming at them. Down the road, we need to know how much oil this worst case scenario actually produced so we can restructure our oil spill response capabilities to be ready.

HANSEN: Those capabilities, given youve mentioned the worst case scenario, according to your figures, is actually going on, shouldnt the preparation begin immediately?

Professor MACDONALD: Well, people are doing everything they can. There clearly is a great of deal of movement underway to mobilize resources up and down the Gulf. But we could mobilize them better, we can understand that whole process more clearly if we had flow rates that everybody agreed on, and flow rates that were backed up by the scientific data.

We need to transition from spin to science here. Thats very important. And I think this is kind of historic opportunity to really show the importance of science in responding to an emergency of this type.

HANSEN: Do you expect that you will be listened to?

Professor MACDONALD: Well, we have been listened. I think that the reason that this Flow Rate Technical Team was formed was to produce numbers that the government and BP could stand by. It's not clear why this is taking so long, but we definitely need to move from the spin to the science in considering how to respond to this emergency.

HANSEN: Ian Macdonald is a professor of oceanography at Florida State University. He joined us from his home in Tallahassee. Thank you so much.

Professor MACDONALD: You're welcome. Thank you.