

Florida declares state of emergency in 6 coastal counties

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Florida Gov. Charlie Crist declared a state of emergency in six counties Friday as a result of the Gulf Coast oil spill, the governor's office said.

Crist joins Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, who declared a state of emergency in his state Thursday.

Crist said the oil spill "threatens the state of Florida with a major disaster." He declared an emergency in Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, Walton, Bay and Gulf counties.

Officials anticipate Venice and Port Fourchon, Louisiana, will be the first places affected Friday when the massive oil spill caused by the rig explosion reaches shore, said a spokesman for the oil company BP.

Officials monitoring the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico have not yet confirmed reports that oil reached land early Friday.

The Coast Guard was conducting a flyover Friday morning to see if oil had reached Louisiana's coastline as federal, state and local officials scrambled to avert a natural disaster threatening to surpass the Exxon Valdez disaster 20 years ago in Alaska.

President Obama is ordering Interior Secretary Ken Salazar "to conduct a thorough review" of the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon rig and subsequent oil spill.

Speaking Friday at the White House, Obama ordered Salazar to "report back to me in 30 days" on any "precautions in technologies" needed to prevent such accidents in the future.

"We're going to make sure that any leases going forward have those safeguards," Obama said. "We've also dispatched teams to the Gulf Coast to inspect all deep-water rigs and platforms to address safety concerns."

Obama said domestic oil production continues to be "an important part of our overall strategy" but said "it must be done responsibly for the safety of our workers and our environment."

Obama announced plans last month to pursue the expansion of oil drilling off the nation's coasts.

Obama is sending three top officials to Louisiana on Friday to inspect efforts to contain the slick.

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, Salazar and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson will conduct an aerial tour of the area and discuss cleanup efforts with federal, state and local officials. They also will meet with officials from BP, which owns the ruptured well where oil continues to leak.

People along the Louisiana coast caught a whiff of the wafting smell of oil, fearing an environmental nightmare of greater scope than when the Valdez tanker ran aground in Alaska's Prince William Sound in 1989 and spilled 11 million gallons of oil.

"There's certainly immense potential consequences," said LuAnn White, director of the Tulane Center for Applied Environmental Public Health.

"This is a disaster," said Dean Blanchard, who runs a wholesale seafood business in the region. "We definitely need some help."

The latest forecast from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration showed the leading edges of the slick reaching the Mississippi and Alabama coasts over the weekend and stretching as far east as Pensacola, Florida, by Monday.

State and federal agencies have strung miles of floating booms -- inflatable or foam barriers -- around the leading edge of the shoreline to contain the spill. Nearly 175,000 feet -- about 33 miles -- of floating booms have been deployed in the region, with about a half-million more feet expected, federal officials said.

A handful of federal agencies have recovered more than 18,000 barrels of an oil-water mix and had deployed nearly 100,000 gallons of dispersant, which breaks up oil, as of Thursday evening, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

Efforts to shut down the well have failed so far, and more complicated plans may take weeks, officials said.

Wildlife conservation groups have said the oil could be a disaster for Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida coastal areas.

Ten wildlife refuges in Mississippi and Louisiana are in the oil's likely path, with the Pass-a-Loutre Wildlife Management Area at the tip of the Mississippi River likely to be the first affected, Jindal said.

The oil well was ripped open by an April 20 explosion that sunk the drill rig Deepwater Horizon, leading to the presumed deaths of 11 missing men.

The Coast Guard on Wednesday raised its estimate of the amount of oil the damaged well was pouring into the Gulf to 210,000 gallons a day -- about 5,000 barrels.

An effort to burn off part of the oil slick Wednesday destroyed about 100 barrels, said Doug Suttles, chief operating officer of BP. But the technique "clearly worked," and larger burns are planned when weather conditions make them possible.

"We believe we can now scale that up and burn between 500 and 1,000 barrels at a time," Suttles said.

The well is leaking from three points, BP said. Under the 1990 Oil Pollution Act, passed in the wake of the Valdez spill, the company is required to foot the bill for the cleanup.