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# Scientists Warn Oil Spill Could Threaten Florida

**By JOHN M. BRODER**

WASHINGTON — Scientists warned Monday that oil from the spill in the Gulf of Mexico was moving rapidly toward a current that could carry it into the Florida Keys and the Atlantic Ocean, threatening coral reefs and hundreds of miles of additional shoreline.

Government officials insisted that the oil had not yet entered the gulf's so-called loop current, and that they were continuing to monitor the movement of the spill closely. But two independent scientists, analyzing ocean current and satellite data, said the oil was in an eddy that was quickly being drawn into the current, portending a much wider spread of the hazardous slick.

The White House, meanwhile, said late Monday that President Obama would soon name an independent commission to investigate the cause of the spill and the response to it, largely supplanting the inquiry now being conducted by the United States Coast Guard and the Minerals Management Service, the Interior Department agency responsible for overseeing offshore oil operations. The role of both agencies in approving the drilling, preparing for an accident and supervising the cleanup are part of any overall inquiry and have raised questions about the independence of their work.

Several members of Congress and outside experts have demanded that an independent panel be created, modeled on those that investigated the Three Mile Island nuclear plant accident in 1979 and the Challenger shuttle explosion in 1986. No current members of government will serve on the panel, which will have a broad charter and wide investigative authority, a White House official said.

Technicians from BP, the company that leased the drilling rig, said Monday that they were continuing to suction oil from the drilling pipe lying on the ocean floor 5,000 feet below the surface. They are pulling oil out through a narrow tube at the rate of about 1,000 barrels a day, roughly a fifth of the official estimate of the leak.

Doug Suttles, BP's chief operating officer, said the tube could accommodate at least 5,000 barrels a day, but engineers are increasing the flow rate very carefully to avoid sucking up water, which might lead to the creation of the icelike structures, called hydrates, that form in the presence of seawater at low temperatures and high pressures and could clog the pipe.

"If we could get as much as half or more of the total flow, if we could actually see this recovering, say, in excess of 2,000 barrels a day," Mr. Suttles said, "we would all be extraordinarily pleased."

Millions of gallons of oil have already escaped from the blown well, presenting an enormous challenge to contain it and keep it from killing ocean life and fouling Gulf Coast beaches and wetlands. That task will become immeasurably more difficult if the huge plume of oil moves into the powerful and unpredictable loop current, which carries warm water in a clockwise motion from the Yucatán Peninsula into the northern Gulf of Mexico, then south to the Florida Keys and out into the Atlantic.

At present, little oil appears to have reached the loop current proper. Rear Adm. Mary E. Landry of the Coast Guard, one of the top officials overseeing the spill response, said at a briefing on Monday: "We know that the oil has not entered the loop current at this time. There may be some leading edge sheen that's getting closer to the loop current, but this spill has not entered the loop current proper."

But the independent scientists said that a portion of the wide oil slick is circulating in an eddy directly north of the loop current. This eddy, known as a cyclone, spins counterclockwise and is dragging the oil south.

"There is a very, very distinct trail of oil from the oil spill, all the way into this cyclone," said Nan Walker, an oceanographer with the Earth Scan Laboratory at Louisiana State University. "So far, it looks like the oil is continuing to be dragged around the cyclone, but eventually it's going to be mixed in with the loop current and make its way south to Florida."

Chuanmin Hu, an oceanographer at the University of South Florida, said that the amount of oil entering the cyclone had increased sharply in the past few days.

"I see a huge oil plume being dragged in that direction," he said. "It's like a river."

Dr. Hu estimated that oil that entered the current could reach the Florida Keys in roughly two weeks.

**Jane Lubchenco, administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said Monday in an interview on PBS's "NewsHour": "By the time the oil is in the loop current, it's likely to be very, very diluted. And so it's not likely to have a very significant impact. It sounds scarier than it is."**

A new round of Congressional hearings into the spill opened here on Monday afternoon, with the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs taking testimony on the government and private sector response to the spill.

At the beginning of the hearing, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano defended the administration's actions after the explosion, saying that officials had engaged in an "all-hands-on-deck response to this event."

Ms. Napolitano acknowledged, however, that the government was largely at BP's mercy in stopping the leak and addressing much of the oil in the water.

"Frankly," she said, "the federal government has limited capability and expertise in responding to wellhead incidents on the sea floor. Nonetheless, the federal government has mobilized scientists and industry experts to collaborate with BP to identify and execute the best strategies for sealing the well, and the president has tasked the Department of Energy to participate in providing any possible expertise on that front."

Also on Monday, the longtime top federal regulator of offshore drilling in the gulf said that he was resigning at the end of the month, according to an Interior Department official.

The regulator, Chris C. Oynes, ran the New Orleans office of the Minerals Management Service for 12 years, overseeing all offshore operations and revenue collections, until he was promoted to a senior position in Washington in 2007. His tenure in the gulf coincided with a 50 percent

increase in offshore oil production, but also in a number of allegations that the minerals service had failed to collect billions of dollars in revenues owed the federal government and had been lax in its oversight of the safety practices of offshore drillers.

Interior Department officials would not say whether Mr. Oynes's resignation was voluntary.

*Reporting was contributed by John Collins Rudolf from New York, Shaila Dewan from New Orleans and Matthew L. Wald from Washington.*