
BP restarts 'top kill' effort

By the CNN Wire Staff

May 27, 2010 6:52 p.m. EDT

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- **NEW:** BP's top-kill effort to cap its gusher in the Gulf resumed about one hour ago
- Scientists say BP spill largest in U.S. history
- New leak estimates range from 12,000 to 19,000 barrels a day
- Obama extends moratorium on deepwater drilling and delays oil exploration in Alaska

There's no end in sight for the situation in the Gulf of Mexico. Anderson Cooper reports live tonight from the region as BP attempts to stop the leak. Watch "AC360°" tonight at 10 ET on CNN for the latest on stopping the leak.

Venice, Louisiana (CNN) -- BP's much-anticipated effort to cap its undersea gusher in the Gulf of Mexico was temporarily suspended at midnight and was restarted in the last hour, a BP executive said.

The "top kill" procedure ended "just before midnight, when we stopped pumping operations," Doug Suttles, the company's chief operating officer, told reporters earlier. BP had been evaluating the results of the first round of pumping over the past 16 hours.

"Nothing has actually gone wrong or unanticipated," Suttles said. He said engineers have been monitoring the process for the past 24 hours, and determining adjustments to the mud-like fluid being injected into the line to counter to flow of oil.

The latest developments in the difficult top-kill procedure came as the Gulf Coast had been holding its breath all day Thursday over a spill that is now estimated at twice the size of the Exxon Valdez disaster.

BP's effort to suppress the oil spill by pumping heavy drilling fluid into the breach could take another 24 to 48 hours to complete, Bob Dudley, its managing director, reported earlier Thursday. At that time, the "top kill" attempt had so far been successful, and the company planned to start

pumping more fluid down a second line in hopes of clogging the underwater well, he said.

Enormous brown plumes of drilling "mud" billowed from the damaged well during the process, which Dudley called "a "titanic arm-wrestling match" a mile below the surface. Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen, who is leading the government's response to the oil spill, said the work "is moving along as everyone had hoped."

"They're pumping mud into the well bore, and as long as mud is going down, hydrocarbons are not going up," Allen told reporters Thursday afternoon. The work could take another night, he told reporters in Venice, near the mouth of the Mississippi River.

Watch Allen respond to critics

"I think we just need to let that run its course, and we will see what happens," Allen said.

Stopping the leak took on even more urgency after government scientists released spill estimates that far exceed the previous 5,000-barrel-a-day number given by BP.

The burst well is spewing oil at a rate of at least 12,000 to 19,000 barrels a day, U.S. Geological Survey Director Marcia McNutt told reporters Thursday, meaning 260,000 to 540,000 barrels had leaked as of 10 days ago -- larger by far than the 250,000 barrels spilled when the tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground in Alaska's Prince William Sound in 1989.

CNN.com Live: Underwater view of top kill procedure

The now 38-day-old spill was beginning to take its toll on Louisiana's sensitive marshes, where heavy oil has been killing plant life and fouling local wildlife and fisheries. On Thursday, the eve of the Memorial Day holiday weekend, the beaches of Grand Isle were empty.

"If only it gets stopped, if what they did yesterday works, that's the beginning of the end," Grand Isle Tourism Commissioner Josie Cheramie said. "We can clean up what's already been put out there, but we just really need to get it stopped. That's the main thing."

iReport: Track the oil spill

The spill claimed a job in Washington, as the head of the scandal-plagued

federal agency that oversees offshore drilling resigned.

Elizabeth Birnbaum stepped down as head of the Minerals Management Service "on her own terms and own volition," Interior Secretary Ken Salazar told a House subcommittee. Two Obama administration sources told CNN that she was fired.

Watch Salazar defend the former director

Reports from the agency's independent inspector general have painted a picture of an agency that has had close ties to the industry, most recently noted in a report on the Lake Charles, Louisiana, office released Tuesday.

Salazar has ordered the agency split into three parts with separate responsibilities since the April 20 explosion on an offshore drilling rig that caused the spill.

In a news conference Thursday afternoon, President Obama said the spill shows "more reforms are needed."

"For years, the oil and gas industry has leveraged such power that they have effectively been allowed to regulate themselves," Obama said. He said U.S. laws were "tailored by the industry to serve their needs instead of the public's," giving short shrift to environmental concerns.

Watch Obama talk about the government's role

After a monthlong review of the industry, he announced his administration was suspending dozens of drilling projects, canceling plans to open new parts of the Gulf of Mexico and the Virginia coast to exploration and suspending new deepwater permits for another six months.

Obama also defended his administration's response to the disaster, telling reporters that people who accuse it of being too slow to respond "don't know the facts."

Watch Obama discuss oil drilling reforms

"It doesn't mean it's going to happen right away or the way I'd like it to happen. It doesn't mean that we're not going to make mistakes," he said. "But there shouldn't be any confusion here: The federal government is fully engaged, and I'm fully engaged."

The spill erupted April 20, when the drilling platform Deepwater Horizon

exploded and burned about 40 miles off Louisiana. The rig sank two days later, taking 11 of its crew of 125 with it.

The Coast Guard and the Minerals Management Service are leading a joint investigation in Louisiana, while several congressional committees are also investigating the disaster.

BP, rig owner Transocean and oilfield service contractor Halliburton have all blamed each other for the explosion, which witnesses have said was preceded by a series of unusual pressure tests and a rush of gas out of the well.

Oil spill demystified: A glossary

One of BP's two representatives on the rig, Robert Kaluza, has refused to testify in the Louisiana hearings, citing his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination, the Coast Guard told CNN. The other, Donald Vidrine, bowed out of his scheduled Thursday appearance, citing illness.

The rig's chief mechanic, Doug Brown, testified Wednesday that Transocean and BP managers argued about plans to finish the well on the day of the explosion, with BP's representative winning the argument. He could not identify which of the BP representatives was involved in the dispute, and BP had no comment on his account.

The rig's offshore installation manager, Jimmy Wayne Harrell, told the Louisiana investigation Thursday that there was no "heated debate." But he said he did reject an initial BP plan to start replacing drill "mud" with seawater without conducting a negative pressure test on the well's initial cementing.

iReport: Share your views on the oil spill response

"I told him it was my policy to do a negative test before displacing with seawater," Harrell said. He placed the discussion the day before the blast, and he said Kaluza, the "company man" in the meeting, agreed to add the negative test to the procedure.

Under questioning by an attorney for Halliburton, which did the cementing work to plug the well, Harrell said BP decided not to do a "bottoms-up" test used to measure temperatures and pressures at the deepest part of the well.

Harrell said he wasn't concerned about the lack of a bottoms-up test, but

said he wasn't aware that Halliburton had recommended using "substantially more mud" as a counterweight in the drill line than BP had recommended.

CNN's Suzanne Malveaux, Ed Henry, Richard Allen Greene, David Mattingley, Lisa Desjardins and Marylynn Ryan contributed to this report.

Find this article at:

<http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/05/27/gulf.oil.spill/index.html?hpt=T1&iref=BN1>