

Obama blasts oil companies over growing spill
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US President Barack Obama lashed oil companies for trying to divert blame for the Gulf of Mexico slick and vowed to sever the "cozy" ties between the industry and government regulators.

As experts said the amount of oil flowing into the sea from the wreckage of the sunken Deepwater Horizon rig was likely much higher than estimated, Obama vowed he would not rest until the leak was contained and capped.

Visibly angered by the gravity of the disaster and the failure to contain the spill despite more than three weeks of efforts, Obama announced a review of the enforcement of environmental protection safeguards.

"I'm not going to rest or be satisfied until the leak is stopped at the source, the oil in the Gulf is contained and cleaned up, and the people of the Gulf are able to go back to their lives and their livelihoods," he vowed.

He also hit out at buck-passing by three oil companies linked to the Deepwater Horizon rig, calling testimony by their top officials at recent congressional hearings a "ridiculous spectacle."

The rig, leased by BP from Transocean, exploded April 20 and sank in flames two days later, fracturing a riser pipe that connected it to the wellhead and sending oil gushing into the Gulf of Mexico. Eleven workers were killed in the disaster.

Engineers from the British energy giant, using underwater robots, struggled Friday to implement their latest tactic to contain the oil leak a mile (1.6 kilometers) down on the seabed.

The plan is to attach an "insertion tube" into the riser pipe to funnel the leaking oil up to a container vessel on the surface, but the process was taking longer than expected.

"It's really complicated because of the depth," spokesman John Crabtree told AFP.

The tube has been billed as more effective than a previous plan to use a so-called "top hat," a container attached to a siphon tube that would be lowered over the leak to collect and then funnel away the oil.

Obama, meanwhile, said he had ordered "top to bottom" reform of the federal agency that oversees oil drilling after allegations that the Minerals Management Service (MMS) had allowed BP and other oil companies to drill in the Gulf of Mexico without first obtaining required permits.

An environmental group, the Center for Biological Diversity, said it had formally filed notice of intent "to sue Interior Secretary Ken Salazar for ignoring marine-mammal protection laws."

"Under Salazar's watch, the Department of the Interior has treated the Gulf of Mexico as a sacrifice area where laws are ignored and wildlife protection takes a backseat to oil-company profits," said oceans director Miyoko Sakashita.

Obama, who recently lifted a moratorium on offshore drilling, acknowledged the federal government also had to bear its responsibility, pledging to strengthen oversight of the oil industry.

"For too long, for a decade or more, there's been a cozy relationship between the oil companies and the federal agency that permits them to drill," he said.

Worst environmental disaster

Experts now fear oil may be spewing from the site at a rate of up to 70,000 barrels (2.9 million gallons) a day, more than 10 times faster than a government estimate of 5,000 barrels (210,000 gallons) a day.

The findings suggest the spill has already eclipsed the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill, which was the worst environmental disaster in US history.

BP was quick to contradict the figures, with Robert Dudley, BP's executive vice president for the Americas, telling CNN that "70,000 barrels a day isn't anywhere I think within the realm of possibility."

And BP chief executive Tony Hayward told Britain's Guardian newspaper that the spill is "tiny" by comparison with the amount of water in the area.

"The Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean. The amount of volume of oil and dispersant we are putting into it is tiny in relation to the total water volume," Hayward said.

But Hayward sounded a different tone following Obama's harsh criticism of BP's apparent inability to stem the leak.

"We absolutely understand and share President Obama's sense of urgency over the length of time this complex task is taking," Hayward said.

"BP... is focused on doing everything in our power to stop the flow of oil, remove it from the surface, and protect the shoreline."

Coast Guard Real Admiral Mary Landry said efforts were underway to assess the flow of oil, but insisted it would not alter plans to combat the massive spill.

"Whether the flow is one, five, 10, or 15,000 barrels per day, the mobilization of resources has been from day one to prepare for a worst-case scenario."

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