

**Obama wants to know 'whose ass to kick' over oil spill**  
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The fragile economy and environment of the southeastern US coast will take years to recover from the worst oil spill in US history, US officials said, as President Barack Obama bared a spot of raw emotion over the disaster.

In an interview to air on NBC television Tuesday, Obama followed criticism that his talk was not tough enough by saying he spoke with fishermen and experts on the catastrophic spill not for academic reasons, but "so I know whose ass to kick."

Though Obama has been to the Gulf three times since the April 20 rig explosion, some critics charge he has been slow to lead.

But the president insisted that on his first visit a month ago he warned "about what a potential crisis this could be," according to excerpts aired on US television late Monday.

As BP increased the amount of oil it is capturing from a broken Gulf of Mexico wellhead, the US administration pressured the British company to step up compensation payouts to residents whose livelihoods have been shattered.

"What is clear is that the economic impact of this disaster is going to be substantial, and it is going to be ongoing," Obama said Monday after meeting with top officials in the latest attempt to show his administration is on top of the crisis.

"I want to repeat, I do not want to see BP nickel-and-dime these businesses that are having a very tough time," he said.

National disaster coordinator, Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen, also warned of the long-term environmental and ecological effects of the slick, which has broken into thousands of ribbons threatening shores from Louisiana to Florida.

"Dealing with the oil spill on the surface will go on for a couple of months," Allen said.

"Long-term issues of restoring environments and habitats and stuff will be years," he said, as US television aired more heart-rending footage of sea birds coated in oily goop and shots of more oil coming ashore.

Allen said BP had succeeded in capturing 11,000 barrels of oil from the containment cap, a mile below the sea (1,600 meters) over the last 24 hours, and planned to soon boost production to 20,000 barrels.

A top company official said BP has collected a total of 28,000 barrels of oil from the ruptured well. "This is an encouraging step," Kent Wells, BP's senior vice president, told a press briefing.

But Allen said it was still unclear just how much oil was escaping the ruptured wellhead, and what proportion of the escaping crude was being captured since an April 20 explosion ripped through the Deepwater Horizon rig.

Two current government models put the estimated flow rate of oil at between 12,000 and 25,000 barrels a day, meaning that so far only a portion of the crude is likely being

captured.

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs however said the operation using the containment cap inserted on the well last week was fraught with difficulty.

"This is a delicate cap and we want to ramp this thing up so that this is a solution that we can work with for weeks and months and don't do something too rapidly to cause something tragic to happen."

BP hoped to move a second production platform into place soon to boost capacity of oil that could be siphoned off and produced soon, Allen said.

BP said Monday it had spent at least 1.25 billion dollars on the Gulf of Mexico oil spill as it continued its efforts to contain the leak.

As part of a previous pledge to fund six berms in the Louisiana barrier islands project, at a cost of 360 million dollars, BP meanwhile announced it would make an immediate payment of 60 million dollars to the state of Louisiana.

And the energy giant is looking at hurricane-resistant methods for siphoning up oil in the event that a major storm strikes before a relief well can be built, officials said.

"We're looking at different options... that would allow us to stay longer and reduce down time" should a major storm strike, said Kent Wells, BP's senior vice president, at a press briefing.

He said a more durable "direct connect" would be put in place by mid-June to increase the amount of oil and gas that can be captured from the well.

The latest poll carried out by ABC News/Washington Post found that 69 percent of people would give the government as negative rating for its handling of the crisis. BP scored a staggering 81 percent negative rating.

Despite the gloom over the disaster, Obama gave an upbeat prediction that the blighted region, still struggling to recover from Hurricane Katrina in 2005, would recover.

"The one thing I'm absolutely confident about is that, as we have before, we will get through this crisis. This is a resilient ecosystem. These are resilient people, down on the Gulf Coast. They bounce back."

The oil has forced the closure of valuable fishing grounds, blighting the livelihoods of many residents in an area also heavily dependent on tourism.

Almost 600 birds have been found dead by wildlife rescue workers in coastal states - including Alabama, Florida and Mississippi - as well as for the first time in Texas, while another 223 were found alive covered in oil.

- AFP