

AoW 5.3.10

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Growing Gulf of Mexico Oil Leak Called Spill of ‘National Significance’

Three top Cabinet officials are being sent to tour the site of the oil rig disaster. Obama is prepared to use ‘all available options’ to try and stop the slick, now within 16 miles of the Louisiana coast.

The growing oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico was designated a spill of national significance and President Obama has pledged all necessary federal help to deal with the massive slick that has crept to within 16 miles of the Louisiana coast.

Three top Cabinet officials will tour the site, the federal government said Thursday as it stepped up its efforts to deal with the environmental disaster.

"I have been receiving frequent briefings from my Cabinet and White House staff," Obama said. "While BP is ultimately responsible for funding the cost of response and cleanup operations, my administration will continue to use every single available resource at our disposal including potentially the Department of Defense to address the incident."

"This is a spill of national significance," Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano told reporters at an earlier White House briefing. The designation means that assets from around the country and especially from other coastal areas can be used to fight the spill.

Officials said they expect oil from a well off Louisiana to reach the Mississippi Delta and its fragile wetlands by the end of Friday or early Saturday. They also said the government would open a federal command center in Mobile, Ala., joining one center already open in Robert, La., to oversee the response to the spill.

"We are being very aggressive and we are prepared for the worst case," Coast Guard Rear Adm. Sally Brice O'Hare said.

In Louisiana, Gov. Bobby Jindal declared a state of emergency to deal with the approaching oil.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar is already in Houston at the command center operated by BP. Napolitano and Environmental Protection Agency administrator Lisa P. Jackson will also head to the Gulf Coast on Friday.

The "national significance" designation represented the seriousness of the threat from the oil spill, officials said. But officials hesitated to make comparisons to the massive Alaskan oil spill from the tanker Exxon Valdez, which remains etched in the American consciousness.

Because of laws passed after that 1989 spill, responders have employed better technology, immediately after the spill, "to ensure this is not an Exxon Valdez type of case," O'Hare said.

The crisis began last week when the oil rig Deepwater Horizon sank after it exploded and ignited days earlier. Of its crew of 126, 11 are missing and presumed dead. The rig was owned by Transocean Ltd. and operated by BP, which is responsible for the cleanup. Officials are still investigating the cause of the explosion and fire and the subsequent leaks.

The oil slick has crept to within 16 miles of the coast. A third leak was discovered, which government officials said is spewing five times as much oil into the water as originally estimated — about 5,000 barrels a day coming from the well 40 miles offshore.

Officials have praised BP for their efforts in fighting the spills. An executive for BP PLC, which operated the oil rig, said on Thursday that the company welcomed all help.

"We'll take help from anyone," said Doug Suttles, chief operating officer for BP Exploration and Production, said on NBC's "Today" show. If the well cannot be closed, almost 100,000 barrels of oil, or 4.2 million gallons, could spill into the gulf before crews can drill a relief well to alleviate the pressure. By comparison, the Exxon Valdez, the worst oil spill in U.S. history, leaked 11 million gallons into Alaska's Prince William Sound.

Officials stressed that BP is the "responding party" to the spill and will have to reimburse taxpayers for all federal expenses in overseeing cleanup. More than 1,000 people are involved in fighting the spill, the Coast Guard announced Thursday. Seventy-six response vessels are being used, including skimmers, tugs, barges and recovery vessels.

According to the Coast Guard, a controlled burn was held Wednesday and officials are examining when to stage another. O'Hare said wind and sea conditions prevented responders from conducting a second controlled burn of the leaking oil in the gulf on Thursday.

She said there were no signs yet of any sea birds or other wildlife affected by the spill, but added: "We are assuming worst case, so we will be prepared for that."

The EPA is ramping up its monitoring of air quality in the gulf region, Jackson said, and preparing to monitor surface water effects. The agency is making plans to take the lead in cleanup operations once the oil hits land.

Salazar has ordered immediate inspections of all deepwater rigs in the gulf, and 55 Interior employees were carrying them out Thursday, Deputy Interior Secretary David Hayes said. Later Thursday, Salazar was set to convene a meeting of oil industry executives to discuss minimizing catastrophic damage from the spill.

A joint Interior-Homeland Security investigation into the origin of the leaks is accelerating, Hayes said, and investigators will have subpoena power: "We are taking immediate steps to get to the bottom of how this happened," he said.

Gibbs and other administration officials, including top energy and climate advisor Carol Browner, conceded that the spill could affect the administration's recently announced plans to explore additional oil drilling in the gulf and off the East Coast and Alaska, which is entering a public comment phase before being finalized.

The same applies to the floundering Senate climate bill, which, as drafted, would expand drilling.

"This will become part of the debate," Browner said. "That goes without saying."

In a letter to the Obama, Florida Sen. Bill Nelson urged the president to postpone indefinitely any plans to step up offshore drilling.