

Obama to visit Gulf as oil slick threatens

Reuters

VENICE, Louisiana (Reuters) - President Barack Obama will visit the U.S. Gulf Coast on Sunday as his administration seeks to deflect criticism it could have responded quicker to a huge oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico that threatens to become an economic and ecological catastrophe.

Efforts to contain the spill and protect sensitive coastline continued on Saturday, but were limited due to rough seas kicked up by heavy winds, authorities said.

Cabinet members, including the homeland security and interior secretaries, will appear on the Sunday morning news shows to discuss the administration's response. Obama's aides said on Saturday he had been "fully engaged" from the beginning in monitoring the widening problem.

U.S. officials conceded on Saturday it was "inevitable" that oil from the uncontrolled leak in the Gulf of Mexico would hit the U.S. coast -- most likely Louisiana first.

"There's enough oil out there that it is logical to think it will hit the shoreline. It's just a question of where and when," said U.S. Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen. "Mother Nature gets a vote in this thing."

Coastline from Louisiana to Florida is threatened by the slick, estimated to be some 130 miles by 70 miles in size and still growing. Many of the communities in the path of the oil slick are the same ones devastated by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The incident could ultimately rival the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster in Alaska, the worst U.S. oil spill ever.

The oil gushing unchecked from the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig explosion and ruptured well about 42 miles off the Louisiana coast has been pushed northward toward the shore by heavy but shifting winds.

On Saturday, the leading edge of the slick wrapped around Venice, a tiny fishing community about 75 miles southeast of New Orleans. The Mississippi and Alabama coasts could be at risk within three to four days, officials said.

Major shipping channels, key fishing areas, national wildlife refuges and popular beaches are in the path of the oily soup. So far, vital shipping lanes leading to the Mississippi River and huge Gulf Coast ports have not been affected, officials said.

In the first sign the spill has affected U.S. offshore energy production, the Minerals Management Service said on Saturday two U.S. offshore Gulf of Mexico production platforms had been shut down and a third was evacuated as a safety precaution. Further shutdowns were possible, it added, but the output affected so far was very

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small.

Still, the Gulf's major oil and gas facilities were largely south and west of the spill and unaffected by it on Saturday, according to spokesmen for the companies, which include BP, Royal Dutch Shell and Chevron Corp.

The leak, which followed a rig explosion and sinking last week, has forced Obama to suspend politically sensitive plans to expand offshore oil drilling, unveiled last month partly to woo Republican support for climate legislation.

Obama's administration, in turn, is piling pressure on London-based BP Plc, the owner of the blown-out well, to do more to plug the flow of oil and contain the spreading slick. The cost of the cleanup, and the potential damage that could be inflicted, are estimated in the billions of dollars.

Crude oil is pouring out at a rate of up to 5,000 barrels (210,000 gallons or 795,000 liters) a day, according to government estimates.

With no easy solution in sight to plug a well almost 1 mile under the sea, several hundred boats and planes were working to contain the slick on the surface.

The Coast Guard extended containment booms, barriers placed in the water that absorb oil, in an effort to stop the oil from soiling the shore. But rough seas hampered those efforts.

The Obama administration has said no new offshore drilling areas would be allowed until after a review of the spill.

The Gulf Coast and its marshlands are home to hundreds of species of wildlife, including manatees, sea turtles, dolphins, porpoises, whales, otters, pelicans and other birds.

The Gulf is also one of the world's most fertile seafood grounds, teeming with shrimp, oysters, mussels, crabs and fish. It supports a \$1.8 billion industry second only to Alaska.

(Additional reporting by [Chris Baltimore](#) [1] and Kristen Hays in Houston, [Tom Bergin](#) [2] in London, [Carlos Barria](#) [3] in Venice, Louisiana, [Phil Stewart](#) [4] in Washington, Joshua Schnyer and [Rebekah Kebede](#) [5] in New York; Writing by [Pascal Fletcher](#) [6] and [Ros Krasny](#) [7]; Editing by [Peter Cooney](#) [8])

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