BP Gets OK to Burn Off Oil & Gas at Sea

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The Transocean Discoverer Enterprise burns off some natural gas as it takes on oil from the broken BP wellhead at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico Tuesday, June 8, 2010. The cap over the broken BP wellhead is collecting more gushing crude day by day, but that's about the extent of the details known as authorities try to pinpoint how much oil is escaping, where it's going and what harm it will cause. (AP Photo/Dave Martin)

PASS CHRISTIAN, Miss. (AP) — BP won permission to start burning oil and gas piped up from its broken seafloor well, one step toward fulfilling a pledge to more than triple how much crude it stops from spewing into the Gulf of Mexico.

Federal authorities gave permission late Monday for BP PLC to use a new method that involves pumping oil from the busted wellhead to a special ship on the surface, where it would be burned off rather than collected.

The British oil giant announced Monday it hopes to trap as much as roughly 2.2 million gallons of oil daily by the end of June as it deploys additional containment

equipment, including the flaring system.

The plan, unveiled after the federal government pressed BP to work faster on containing the gusher, came as President Barack Obama paid his fourth visit to the stricken Gulf and promised residents that life would return to normal after the worst oil spill in U.S. history, which has disrupted fishing and tourism and spoiled ecologically rich estuaries.

Some Gulf Coast residents seemed skeptical of the promises from the president and the oil company.

"I think that as long as BP is still in control, there's not a lot he can do other than show support for the residents of these Gulf states," Jennifer Jenkins, 34, of Long Beach, said of Obama.

The president visited Mississippi and Alabama Monday as part of a two-day stop. He sought to assure residents — and the country — that the government will "leave the Gulf Coast in better shape than it was before." He visits Florida on Tuesday ahead of a national address on the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history, which has become a stern test of his presidency.

While the president was on the Gulf, congressional investigators released documents that showed BP made a series of money-saving shortcuts and blunders that dramatically increased the danger of a destructive spill from a well that an engineer ominously described as a "nightmare" just six days before the April blowout.

Investigators found that BP was badly behind schedule on the project and losing hundreds of thousands of dollars with each passing day, and responded by cutting corners in the well design, cementing and drilling efforts and the installation of key safety devices.

The House Energy and Commerce Committee released dozens of internal documents that outline several problems on the deep-sea rig in the days and weeks before the April 20 explosion that killed 11 workers and set in motion the catastrophe. The committee has been investigating.

"Time after time, it appears that BP made decisions that increased the risk of a blowout to save the company time or expense. If this is what happened, BP's carelessness and complacency have inflicted a heavy toll on the Gulf, its inhabitants, and the workers on the rig," said Democratic Reps. Henry A. Waxman and Bart Stupak.

Asked about the investigation, BP spokesman Mark Proegler said the company's main focus right now is on the response and stopping the flow of oil.

The breached well has dumped as much as 114 million gallons of oil into the Gulf under the worst-case scenario described by scientists — a rate of more than 2 million a day. BP has collected 5.6 million gallons of oil through its latest

containment cap on top of the well, or about 630,000 gallons per day.

To trap more oil faster, BP would continue to siphon off the flow from a containment cap sitting above the well to a drill ship sitting on the ocean surface. More oil from the blowout preventer — a stack of pipes sitting on the seafloor — also would be drawn through hoses and pipes to a drilling rig where it will be burned using a specialized flare.

Still, BP warned its containment efforts could be hampered if hoses or pipes clog and as engineers struggle to run the complicated collection system.

Also, BP spokesman Bill Salvin told The Associated Press that the company has contracted with actor Kevin Costner and Ocean Therapy Solutions to use 32 of their centrifuge machines that are designed to separate oil from water.

"We recognized they had potential and put them through testing, and that testing was done in shallow water and in very deep water and we were very pleased by the results," Salvin said.

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