Oil Spill Estimate Doubles

This image from video provided by BP PLC early Friday morning, June 11, 2010 shows oil continuing to pour out at the site of the Deepwater Horizon oil well in the Gulf of Mexico. New figures for the blown-out well at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico show the amount of oil spewing may have been up to twice as much as previously thought, according to scientists consulting with the federal government. (AP Photo/BP PLC)

HOUSTON (AP) — With each new look by scientists, the oil spill just keeps looking worse.

New figures for the blown-out well at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico show the amount of oil spewing may have been up to twice as much as previously thought, according to scientists consulting with the federal government.

That could mean 42 million gallons to more than 100 million gallons of oil have already fouled the Gulf's fragile waters, affecting people who live, work and play along the coast from Louisiana to Florida — and perhaps beyond.

It is the third — and perhaps not the last — time the U.S. government has had to increase its estimate of how much oil is gushing. Trying to clarify what has been a contentious and confusing issue, officials on Thursday gave a wide variety of estimates.

All the new spill estimates are worse than earlier ones — and far more costly for BP, which has seen its stock sink since the April 20 explosion that killed 11 workers and triggered the spill. Most of Thursday's estimates had more oil flowing in an hour than what officials once said was spilling in an entire day.

"This is a nightmare that keeps getting worse every week," said Michael Brune, executive director of the Sierra Club. "We're finding out more and more information about the extent of the damage. ... Clearly we can't trust BP's estimates of how much oil is coming out."

The spill was flowing at a daily rate that could possibly have been as high as 2.1 million gallons, twice the highest number the federal government had been saying, U.S. Geological Survey Director Marcia McNutt, who is coordinating estimates, said Thursday. But she said possibly more credible numbers are a bit lower.

And the estimate does not take into account the cutting of the riser pipe on June 3 — which BP said would increase the flow by about 20 percent — and subsequent placement of a cap. No estimates were given for the amount of oil gushing from the well after the cut. Nor are there estimates since a cap was put on the pipe, which already has collected more than 3 million gallons.

The estimates are not nearly complete and different teams have come up with different numbers. A new team from the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute came in with even higher estimates, ranging from 1 million gallons a day to 2.1 million gallons. If the high end is true, that means nearly 107 million gallons have spilled since April 20.

Even using other numbers that federal officials and scientists call a more reasonable range would have about 63 million gallons spilling since the rig explosion. If that amount was put in gallon milk jugs, they would line up for nearly 5,500 miles. That's the distance from the spill to London, where BP is headquartered, and then continuing on to Rome.

By comparison, the worst peacetime oil spill, 1979's Ixtoc 1 in Mexico, was about 140 million gallons over 10 months. The Gulf spill hasn't yet reached two months. The Exxon Valdez, the previous worst U.S. oil spill, was just about 11 million gallons, and the new figures mean Deepwater Horizon is producing an Exxon Valdez size spill every five to 13 days.

Meanwhile, oil still was washing up on Gulf beaches. But it wasn't as bad Friday morning at Orange Beach, Ala., as it had been earlier in the week. Waves brought in a foot-long chunk of what appeared to be solid oil on the white sand. One side was flat and curved, while the other was honeycombed with bubbles and a single spot

where crude oozed out. Standing near the water line, Elaine Fox picked it up without a thought.

"I'm not dead, I'm not sick," said Fox, of West Monroe, La. "I think a lot of this is nothing but media hype."

A day earlier, President Barack Obama consoled relatives of the 11 workers killed in the oil rig explosion, acknowledging their "unimaginable grief" and personally assuring the families he will stand with them.

One man who lost a son asked Obama to support efforts to update federal law limiting the amount of money the families can collect.

"He told us we weren't going to be forgotten," said Keith Jones of Baton Rouge, La. "He just wanted us to know this wasn't going to leave his mind and his heart."

Jones' 28-year-old son, Gordon, was working on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig leased by BP PLC when it exploded and then sank.

Later in the day, the White House released a letter from Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen, who is overseeing the crisis for the government, inviting BP Chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg and "any appropriate officials from BP" to meet Wednesday with senior administration officials. Allen said Obama, who has yet to speak with any BP official since the explosion more than seven weeks ago, would participate in a portion of the meeting.

As the crude continues to foul the water, Louisiana leaders are rushing to the defense of the oil-and-gas industry and pleading with Washington to immediately bring back offshore drilling. Though angry at BP over the disaster, state officials warn that the Obama administration's six-month halt to new permits for deep-sea oil drilling has sent Louisiana's most lucrative industry into a death spiral.

They contend that drilling is safe overall and the moratorium is a knee-jerk reaction. They worry that it comes at a time when another major Louisiana industry — fishing — has been brought to a standstill by the Gulf mess.

"Mr. President, you were looking for someone's butt to kick. You're kicking ours," Lafourche Parish President Charlotte Randolph said Thursday.

The oil and gas industry brings in billions of dollars in revenue for Louisiana and accounting for nearly one-third of the nation's domestic crude production, and it took a heavy blow when the government imposed the moratorium.

"It's going to put us out of business," said Glenn LeCompte, owner of a Louisiana catering company that provides food to offshore rigs.

With all sorts of estimates for what's flowing from the BP well — some even smaller than the amount collected by BP in its containment cap — McNutt said the most credible range at the moment is between 840,000 gallons and 1.68 million gallons a

day. Then she added that it was "maybe a little bit more."

But later Thursday, the Interior Department said scientists who based their calculations on video say the best estimate for oil flow before June 3 was between 1.05 million gallons a day and 1.26 million gallons a day. The department mentioned only a cubic meter per second rate from Woods Hole — not a rate that translated into actual amounts — and those numbers only added to the confusion on just how much oil is gushing out.

Previous estimates had put the range roughly between half a million and a million gallons a day, perhaps higher. At one point, the federal government claimed only 42,000 gallons were spilling a day and then it upped the number to 210,000 gallons.

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