BP's Relief Tunnel Should Reach Well by Weekend

COLLEEN LONG & DAVID DISHNEAU, Associated Press Writers

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — The federal government's spill chief said a relief tunnel should finally reach BP's broken Gulf of Mexico well by the weekend, meaning the three-month-old gusher could be snuffed for good within two weeks.

After several days of concern about the well's stability and the leaky cap keeping the oil mostly bottled up, retired Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen said Tuesday that engineers concluded the risk of a bigger blowout was minimal and were getting closer to pumping mud into the column to permanently seal it.

"We continue to be pleased with the progress," Allen said in Washington, giving the go-ahead to keep the well cap shut for at least 24 more hours and possibly longer.

Meanwhile, a published report said BP's beleaguered CEO, Tony Hayward, planned to step down after a series of PR blunders, including yacht racing during the spill and saying he wanted his life back. The Times newspaper in London, quoting company sources it did not identify, said Wednesday that Hayward was likely to go by early September.

But BP spokeswoman Sheila Williams said, "Tony is leading the company in a strong and robust way and has the support of the board."

Shares of British-based BP PLC, which have lost about 40 percent since the disaster began in April, were up more than 3 percent Wednesday on the London Stock Exchange after the company announced a $7 billion asset sale to Houston-based Apache Corp. to help pay for the catastrophe.

Just weeks after promising to raise $10 billion by selling pieces of its business, BP said Tuesday that Apache will buy properties in the U.S., Canada and Egypt. BP says it has spent nearly $4 billion on the spill so far and is on the hook for a $20 billion fund for damaged Gulf residents and businesses.

On the Gulf, BP vice president Kent Wells said crews hope to drill sideways into the blown-out well and intercept it at the end of July. The relief well is necessary to plug the well permanently.

After it's done, crews will begin the kill procedure, pumping mud and cement into the hole a mile underwater to seal it, which BP said could take anywhere from five days to a couple of weeks.

"Everything's looking good," Well said. "The relief well is exactly where we want it. It's pointed in the right direction, and so we're feeling good about that."

Engineers are also considering shooting drilling mud down through the cap to

increase the chances that the attempt to kill the well succeeds.

News that a solution is near cheered Jeff Hunt, who scans the waves daily for telltale tar balls in Pensacola Beach, Fla.

"It makes me very happy, after nearly three months, that they finally have gotten to a pinnacle point of closing it," said the co-owner of a hair salon. "We need to plug the thing."

But some boat captains are concerned by a large reduction in the number of boats being paid to skim for oil in the Gulf.

BP has about 1,600 boats operating daily in waters off Alabama, Florida and Mississippi. That's 600 fewer than last week, said Matt Kissinger, director of BP's "vessels of opportunity" program in the region.

Less oil has been spotted in recent days, meaning fewer boats are needed to skim, Kissinger said.

Some boat captains have been earning more through the cleanup than they typically do from fishing.

Shrimper Minh V. Le of Bayou La Batre had both of his boats out skimming for oil initially, but one has been deactivated.

He worries about the loss of revenue and the possibility BP will leave the Gulf too early.

"A lot of us have put a lot of sweat into the program," he said. "You've got a 100-degree heat index, and there's a lot of wear and tear on our boats. If something breaks down it can cost $30,000. What they're paying isn't a drop in the bucket."

The BP-leased Deepwater Horizon rig exploded April 20, killing 11 workers and touching off one of America's worst environmental crises. The well has spewed somewhere between 94 million and 184 million gallons into the Gulf. BP said the cost of dealing with the spill has now reached nearly $4 billion.

Associated Press writers Jay Reeves in Orange Beach, Ala., Janet McConnaughey and Phuong Le in New Orleans, Michael Kunzelman in Kenner, La., Ben Feller and Frederic J. Frommer in Washington and Robert Barr in London contributed to this report, along with AP energy writer Chris Kahn in New York.

Source URL (retrieved on *09/23/2014 - 5:04am*):
http://www.chem.info/news/2010/07/bps-relief-tunnel-should-reach-well-weekend?qt-recent_content=0