

# Oil Spill Investigators Focus on Communication

HARRY R. WEBER & RAMIT PLUSHNICK-MASTI, Associated Press Writers

HOUSTON (AP) — Federal investigators seeking the cause of the rig explosion that led to BP's massive Gulf oil spill focused Monday on communication and chain of command, wondering at times whether the key players knew enough to handle an emergency.

They also questioned whether a piece of failed equipment designed to prevent the disaster was inspected on schedule. Details about the so-called blowout preventer, which was supposed to lock in place to prevent a spill in the case of an explosion, will be important as investigators pull it from the seabed to analyze.

Testimony about the frantic moments after the spill, when a distraught worker told the rig manager "she just blew, she just blew," will also be key to understanding what happened April 20. That's when the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded, killing 11 workers and subsequently spewing 206 million gallons of oil into the Gulf.

Two men who testified Monday were key to the successful operation of the complex deepwater rig. But Neil Cramond, who oversees BP's marine operations in the Gulf, acknowledged he rarely had contact with Paul Johnson, who managed the rig for owner Transocean Ltd., which leased it to BP.

Cramond also testified that captains of rigs like the Deepwater Horizon are ultimately responsible for crew safety and environmental matters, but are not always involved in decisions about how to deal with drilling operations and potential risks.

Members of the joint U.S. Coast Guard-Bureau of Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement investigative panel are trying to figure out what caused the explosion and how regulation, safety and oversight can be improved to prevent another such catastrophe.

Investigators asked Johnson about whether maintenance of the blowout preventer had been up to code. Johnson testified that a September 2009 safety audit did not include a complete inspection of the device, and so "I don't think it's a complete audit."

A few months later, however, as the rig was being moved to the well, the blowout preventer was inspected. But investigators questioned whether this was in line with the three- to five-year timetable laid out in regulatory codes.

Meanwhile, Cramond's description of how responsibilities and communication were divided among the parties responsible for the sunken rig raised eyebrows at times among the investigators.

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While questioning Cramond, a Coast Guard official wondered if there was anyone who had a "big picture" of what was going on. He said he was concerned the captain was responsible for keeping the crew and vessel safe and preventing pollution, but had "little say and awareness of what's going on in terms of risk."

"I believe what you've outlined is an accurate picture," Cramond said, noting such arrangements are standard in the oil and gas industry.

He insisted, however, that records will show that on a number of occasions he communicated concerns about safety problems to the people who needed to know about them.

Asked if the Deepwater Horizon was properly manned at the time of the explosion that killed 11 workers, he replied: "I have no information that would say otherwise."

Johnson, whose responsibilities included training and personnel, was not on board the Deepwater Horizon when it exploded. He said he only visited the rig three days each month and was not able to monitor real-time data from it at his location on shore.

The blast knocked out communication between him and the captain and offshore installation manager, he testified. Eventually, he managed to talk to one of the rig workers who told him he had insulation in his eyes and was struggling to see and hear.

"I asked what happened," Johnson testified. "He said, 'I don't know Paul, she just blew, she just blew.' At that point I know he was crying so I just shut the conversation down."

Another witness, Transocean performance operations manager Daun Winslow, arrived on the rig the day of the blast for a routine site visit. He was having some coffee and a cigarette below decks when he heard a loud bang. He testified that the power was out, the emergency generator didn't work, there was no water, the derrick was consumed by flames and the walls were quickly crumbling around the crew.

"I heard somebody yelling in the background that they were jumping overboard," Winslow told the panel.

In March, barely a month before the accident, one of Cramond's employees visited the Deepwater Horizon to ensure Transocean had resolved safety violations found in a random audit a year earlier that forced the rig to shut down for five days.

Cramond said 63 of 70 issues had been resolved, and the remainder were minor problems that the company was given six months to resolve.

Cramond, however, could answer almost no questions regarding the drilling side of the operation, insisting his responsibility was largely to determine whether the vessel was able to remain seabound. He did, however, acknowledge that several

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systems and pieces of equipment overlapped, saying a Transocean employee was ultimately responsible for having a broader idea of what was happening on the rig as a whole.

Asked if there was a process in place to ensure direct communication between the different parties overseeing the rig's operation, Cramond said: "I can't completely answer that question."

In addition to operating the rig that exploded, BP owned a majority interest in the ruptured undersea well. Anadarko Petroleum held a minority interest in the well.

The hearings in Houston were scheduled to run through Friday. They are the fourth set of hearings by the panel, which isn't expected to issue any conclusions for months.

The temporary cap placed on the blown-out well in mid-July has kept oil from spewing, and the final sealing should take place after Labor Day.

Engineers are preparing to first remove the failed blowout preventer and replace it with another. After that, they will complete the drilling of a relief well, then will plug the blown-out well for good by pumping mud and cement into the bottom.

There are three pieces of pipe from the well inside the blowout preventer that engineers want to remove before attempting to replace it, retired Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen, the government's point man on the spill response, told reporters Monday.

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