

BP Accused of Trying to Disengage from Oil Spill

MICHAEL PELTIER, Reuters

PENSACOLA, Florida | (Reuters) - Authorities will keep up pressure on BP Plc to ensure it fully compensates victims of last year's Gulf of Mexico oil spill, Florida Republican Senator Marco Rubio said on Monday after the company indicated it wants to limit future claims.

Last year's Deepwater Horizon rig explosion, which caused the worst offshore oil spill in U.S. history, spewed slicks and ribbons of oil and tarballs along the coast from the Louisiana marshes to the white beaches of the Florida Panhandle.

The spill triggered a barrage of compensation claims against BP from Gulf fishermen, business executives, hoteliers, restaurateurs and residents.

The London-based oil giant originally pledged to pay all reasonable claims.

In a document made public on Friday, BP said it was moving to limit future claims related to the spill as the Gulf region's economy recovers.

The Gulf economy is strong and "there is no basis to assume that claimants, with very limited exceptions, will incur a future loss related to the oil spill," BP said in a statement filed with the Gulf Coast Claims Facility [ID:nN1E7671PL].

Rubio, a Tea Party favorite and rising star of the Republican Party, criticized the BP statement at a public hearing on the Deepwater Horizon spill, which he hosted in the beachfront town of Pensacola on Florida's Panhandle.

"BP, from a corporate perspective, is trying to get out of here as quickly as they can," he said.

"They are trying to disengage from this process as soon as they can and I think it is incumbent on us policymakers to make sure that doesn't happen and that BP fulfills its obligations to this region," Rubio added.

Craig Savage, director of media relations for BP America's Gulf Coast Restoration Organization, said the company believes the Gulf Coast Claims Facility needed to adjust its payment program and "take into account the strong recovery underway on the Gulf Coast."

"The GCCF made it clear, recognizing the fluid nature of economic recovery, that it would continue to evaluate the performance of the Gulf economy and would undertake a renewed evaluation of available data every four months," Savage added in comments e-mailed to Reuters.

Months of Frustration

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Rubio said BP needed to honor its commitment to make Pensacola and the entire Gulf Coast region whole again.

He said he was concerned about the BP memo, especially because the effects of the spill may not be fully known for years.

Rubio's session on Monday, in which he heard from local officials and business leaders, was held on behalf of the U.S. Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship.

The panel is expected to craft legislation to allocate money from the fines expected to be paid by BP under the federal Clean Water Act. An initial hearing on the matter could come this week, Rubio said.

Florida Representative Doug Broxson, a Republican from Gulf Breeze whose state House district was among the most heavily affected by the spill, spoke at Monday's hearing about months of frustration in his dealings with BP and the \$20 billion GCCF fund administered by Kenneth Feinberg.

As of July, the GCCF had paid \$4.5 billion to 195,000 claimants.

Broxson said he was not surprised by BP's recent memo, which he characterized as a well-timed step in the company's exit strategy from last year's disaster.

"I'm trying not to be cynical, but when you spend several millions hiring consultants, you probably have this planned out," he said.

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