Montana, Exxon Mobil Split over River Oil Spill

MATTHEW BROWN,Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer has decided Exxon Mobil and the state don't make good roommates after nearly a week of working together in close quarters to clean up an estimated 42,000 gallons of crude oil released into the Yellowstone River.

State officials have moved out of a joint command post overseeing the response to the spill — a mess that has painted a fresh target for scorn on one of the world's largest energy companies.

Security guards working for Exxon Mobil Corp. have closely guarded access to the command post on the second floor of the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Billings, where the Environmental Protection Agency and other federal agencies also are stationed. Attempts by The Associated Press to talk to government officials there in the first days after the spill were denied.

Schweitzer says the company and EPA have defied state open government laws by denying public access. So on Friday, he opened an alternate state-run Yellowstone River Oil Spill Information Center, underscoring mounting tensions over the pipeline rupture that has dirtied parts of the scenic waterway.

"Montana has a much higher standard than Exxon Mobil when it comes to transparency," Schweitzer said. "We won't be involved in secret meetings and secret documents."

The Democratic governor pointed out discrepancies in the company's reports of how long it took to shut down the pipeline after it ruptured July 1 and said company officials are downplaying the damage to wildlife.

With its multi-billion-dollar profits and the legacy of the 11-million-gallon Valdez oil tanker spill of 1989, Exxon Mobil offers an easy foil for a politician like Schweitzer.

Throw in the corporation's massive ground presence to deal with the spill — an

estimated 500 contractors and employees as of Friday, plus its role providing security — and it's no wonder the governor's folksy yet combative style has resonated in a state proud of its natural attractions and clean environment.

"I just want to thank you for who you are and for your skepticism of Exxon," Susan Huntoon, 65, of Laurel, told the governor during a community meeting Friday at the state's new command post. "We all know they want to spend as little as they can. We saw that with BP."

Keenly aware of the company's public image, Exxon Mobil executives have repeatedly apologized for the spill and have pledged to spend whatever it takes to restore the river.

But the company has made some glaring missteps on the public relations front, including the appearance that it was downplaying the extent of the contamination in the first days of the cleanup.

The company said then that the damage was concentrated within a five- to 10-mile stretch of river. That figure has been growing since, hitting 30 miles in recent days.

Later came inaccuracies in how long it took to shut down the pipeline from the company's control room in Houston. After initially saying it took six minutes to shut down the pipeline's pumps and 30 minutes to stop the flow of oil completely, the company revealed in filings with pipeline regulators that it took almost an hour.

Exxon Mobil Pipeline Co. President Gary Pruessing has apologized for that, too. Company officials insist there was never any intent to deceive.

Spokesman Alan Jeffers said Exxon Mobil learned its lesson about dealing with spills forthrightly after the Exxon Valdez soiled Alaska's coastline.

Exxon Mobil quickly came under fire in that case for downplaying the threat, deflecting the blame and being aloof. Crude oil from the tanker still lingers on some beaches 22 years later, and some marine species never recovered.

"Our focus needs to be on ensuring accuracy, the double- and triple-checking of data to ensure the public gets accurate information," Jeffers said. "The principal of active and frequent communications with the community is one we take very seriously. It's part of the system that was born out of the Valdez accident and is really important for us."

EPA spokesman Matthew Allen said the agency has been pleased with Exxon Mobil's efforts to date. The company has accepted fault for the spill and has heeded the agency's orders on the cleanup, Allen said.

"It's much better to have a company that acknowledges this is their responsibility and is doing the cleanup than to fight them all the way," he said. "We're happy with the level of cooperation."

There have been confirmed reports of oil as far as 80 miles downstream from the pipeline break near Laurel, and on Friday, state officials said they had found significant amounts of oil 40 miles downstream near Pompeys Pillar National Monument.

The spill came after local and federal officials for months questioned the stability of the riverbank where Exxon Mobil's 12-inch pipeline crosses the Yellowstone.

In June 2009, an 8-inch Williston Basin Interstate Pipeline Co. natural gas line that crossed in almost the same spot ruptured during high waters. That line has since been abandoned and a new one installed 30 to 50 feet beneath the riverbed, said Tim Rasmussen with MDU Resources Group, Williston Basin's parent company.

A shallower 16-inch gas pipeline operated by Williston at the same crossing was shut down May 28 over fears that it, too, could fail, Rasmussen said Friday. That line has not been reopened.

At Friday's public meeting, Schweitzer and other state officials told landowners along the river to collect samples of oil-stained water, soil and grass that they can use as evidence if they have to file claims against Exxon Mobil.

Schweitzer brought hundreds of sample jars to hand out at the event, which attracted about 100 people. About two dozen raised their hands when Schweitzer asked if there were riverfront landowners present.

Despite early worries that the spill could poison the Yellowstone, in terms of sheer volume the spill is minuscule compared to the more than 4 million barrels released during last year's BP Deepwater Horizon spill into the Gulf of Mexico.

No one was killed in the Yellowstone River pipeline failure, and so far there have been no widespread fish kills or other catastrophic wildlife scenarios such as those the BP spill produced.

U.S. Rep. Denny Rehberg, R-Mont., said Friday that the House Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines and Hazardous Materials will hold the first congressional hearing on the spill next week.

But Schweitzer knows the spill's moment in the spotlight won't last long.

Ever aware of the changing rhythms of the news cycle, the governor said he's going to press the EPA and Exxon Mobil as aggressively as he can. And if the outside world is listening in, all the better.

"We're going to keep poking them with a stick," he said. "But eventually some congressman's going to run off with someone's wife or take a picture of himself, and then we're out of the press. For now, it's keeping the heat on the people in Houston, in Washington."

Source URL (retrieved on *03/14/2014 - 6:03am*):
http://www.chem.info/news/2011/07/montana-exxon-mobil-split-over-river-oil-spill