After Isaac Exposes Oil, BP Aims to Dig it Out

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NEW ORLEANS (AP) — BP PLC said Tuesday it wants to aggressively clean up buried oil exposed on Louisiana's beaches by Hurricane Isaac's churning waves.

The company said it has asked for permission to dig deep into beaches and remove oil buried since a BP well blew out on April 20, 2010, leading to the nation's largest offshore spill and killing 11 workers.

But digging deep to remove oil can bring its own problems — it can be harmful to creatures that live on beaches or feed on them and it also may lead to erosion by loosening up sand. Erosion is a constant worry in Louisiana because the state is losing land at an alarming rate.

The Coast Guard said it was reviewing BP's plans. The cleanup was restricted mostly to the surface of ecologically sensitive beaches, such as those on national wildlife refuges, while many recreational beaches saw more intensive cleanup.

After Isaac churned ashore two weeks ago, waves whipping up the Gulf's shorelines in places exposed tar mats left over from BP's spill and washed tar balls ashore. Laboratory tests have confirmed that globs of oil found on two Louisiana beaches after Isaac came were from the 2010 BP spill.

Scientific testing also has confirmed a link between oil from the massive BP spill and tar found on Alabama beaches after Isaac. Auburn University researchers collected about 15 pounds of tar balls after the storm and officials from Gulf Shores and Orange Beach picked up still more.

Mike Utsler, the president of BP's Gulf Coast Restoration Organization, said oil in the form of tar balls and tar mats were reported in the panhandle of Florida, Alabama and Louisiana. He said no significant amounts of oil have been discovered in Mississippi, but he said inspections are continuing there.

He said the oil was covered up in 2010 by tropical storms, in particular Bonnie. He said Isaac "has helped uncover those buried tar mats and tar sands." He said it was not unexpected for buried oil to get exposed in a hurricane like Isaac.

He said the exposed oil does not pose a risk to humans because it is old and has shed toxic compounds.

John Pardue, a professor of civil and environmental engineering at Louisiana State University, agreed the oil being found after Isaac isn't a threat to humans but said it does pose a threat to wildlife such as shoreline wading birds.

The discovery of the buried oil does not mean that the Gulf is seeing a repeat of the

summer of 2010, when oil was spewing from an out-of-control well about 55 miles off the Louisiana coast.

Now BP is proposing to aggressively clean up beaches in a process it calls "deep cleaning." Utsler said deep cleaning could involve cleaning beaches to a depth of up to about 5 feet. Utsler said ecological concerns have forced BP in many places to limit cleanup to beach surfaces. He said beaches in Alabama were cleaned to a depth of 5 feet and saw little oil being exposed there.

But he said it was time for a more aggressive approach.

"We need to move fast," he said. "The waves and tides are already starting to bring sand back in."

Cathy Norman, who oversees a land trust that owns Fourchon Beach, a stretch of beach heavily oiled, said she was concerned about any BP plan that would involve big equipment tilling sand, a technique BP has used elsewhere.

"It's basically land farming, it spreads things around, it doesn't remove" the oil, she said. She said it also "disrupts the entire crust of the beach" and could lead to additional erosion. She said BP needs to be more surgical in its cleanup work and carefully remove tar mats.

BP said Tuesday that the beaches would be sifted, rather than tilled, which they described as a gentler scrubbing of the beaches.

Garret Graves, a coastal aide to Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, said the state was reviewing BP's deep-cleaning proposal. But he accused BP of not doing a good enough job in finding what oil remained along the Louisiana coast before Isaac hit.

"BP continues to refuse to carry out any sort of monitoring program to help us find oil mats," he said. "BP apparently feels that it is contrary to their interests to actually 'find oil.'"

Utsler said BP has been diligent in its cleanup. "We stand ready," he said. "We've proven our commitment over the past 29 months."

Its cleanup and response costs over the last two years were more than $14 billion and more than 66 million man-hours have gone to protecting and treating the Gulf shoreline, the company has said. BP has been running TV ads touting Gulf Coast tourism and urging people to "come on down."

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