BP Manager Testifies at Gulf Spill Trial

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NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A BP team leader who supervised managers on the oil rig that exploded in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 testified Monday that he was frustrated by last-minute changes to the drilling project, but didn't have any safety concerns before the deadly blast.

John Guide was BP's wells team leader for the Deepwater Horizon project and supervised two rig managers who have been indicted on manslaughter charges in the deaths of 11 workers. He was the first witness to testify during the eighth week of a federal trial seeking to assign responsibility for the disaster.

The explosion that killed the rig workers triggered the nation's worst offshore oil spill. Barring a settlement, U.S. District Judge Carl Barbier, who is hearing testimony without a jury, could decide how much more money BP and its contractors owe for their roles in the catastrophe.

In an email three days before the April 20, 2010, blowout of BP's Macondo well, Guide complained about last-minute changes and warned his boss, David Sims, that the operation wouldn't succeed if it continued "in this manner." Guide sent the email after learning about a change in the plan for cementing BP's Macondo well.

"David, over the past four days there has been so many last minute changes to the operation that the (BP rig managers) have finally come to their wits end. The quote is 'flying by the seat of our pants,'" Guide wrote.

Plaintiffs' attorneys have claimed that email shows BP sacrificed safety in a rush to complete a project that was behind schedule and millions of dollars over budget.

Guide, however, testified that the concerns he expressed in his April 17 email had nothing to do with safety. Guide said he never tried to cut corners to save money or pressured rig crew members to speed up operations so the rig could move on to drilling another well.

"Safety was the number one priority," he said.

Guide said he sent the April 17 email after learning that BP planned to add 30 barrels of "spacer" during the Macondo well's cement job. A spacer is a liquid used to separate other liquids from each other.

"I didn't know about this," he recalled. "I was surprised."

Robert Kaluza and Donald Vidrine, BP's well site leaders on the rig at the time of the explosion, have pleaded not guilty to manslaughter charges and await a separate

trial. An indictment last year accuses Kaluza and Vidrine of botching a key safety test and disregarding abnormally high pressure readings that were glaring signs of trouble before the blowout.

Guide said he spoke to Vidrine on the morning of April 17 and discussed the last-minute changes to the drilling plans.

"Mr. Vidrine was frustrated," he recalled. "He made the comment that it just seemed like trying to put all this stuff together made him feel like he was flying by the seat of his pants."

Guide said he also discussed his concerns with Brian Morel, a BP engineer on the project, before sending the email to Sims.

"Everybody wants to do the right thing, but, this huge level of paranoia from engineering leadership is driving chaos," Guide wrote in the email. "Brian has called me numerous times trying to make sense of all the insanity."

More than a month before the blowout, Sims wrote but never sent a scathing email in which he accused Guide of criticizing "nearly everything we do on the rig" without accepting responsibility for his role in supervising the operation.

"You are always defensive and the victim. You seem to not want to make a decision so that you can criticize it later," Sims wrote in the email, one of several testy exchanges he had with Guide.

Guide agreed with plaintiffs' attorney Robert Cunningham's suggestion that a "dysfunctional leadership team in a high-risk operation" could create a safety risk. But he said he doesn't think he did anything that caused or contributed to the blowout.

"I don't think I could have done anything different," he said during Cunningham's cross-examination.

BP has already pleaded guilty to manslaughter and other criminal charges and agreed to pay $4 billion in criminal penalties, but the company faces billions more in civil claims by the federal government and Gulf states. The ultimate price tag for BP will be much higher if the plaintiffs' lawyers persuade Barbier that BP acted with gross negligence before the blowout.

Barbier also must consider how much fault to assign to rig owner Transocean Ltd. and Halliburton, BP's cement contractor on the project.

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