

BP Oil Leak May Last Until Christmas in Worst Case Scenario

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BP Plc's failure since April to plug a Gulf of Mexico oil leak have prompted forecasts the crude may continue gushing into December in what President Barack Obama has called the greatest environmental disaster in U.S. history.

BP's attempts so far to cap the well and plug the leak on the seabed a mile below the surface haven't worked, while the start of the Atlantic hurricane season this week indicates storms in the Gulf may disrupt other efforts.

"The worst-case scenario is Christmas time," Dan Pickering, the head of research at energy investor Tudor Pickering Holt & Co. in Houston, said. "This process is teaching us to be skeptical of deadlines."

Ending the year with a still-gushing well would mean about 4 million barrels of oil spilled into the Gulf, based on the government's current estimate of 12,000 to 19,000 barrels leaking a day. That would wipe out marine life deep at sea near the leak and elsewhere in the Gulf, and along hundreds of miles of coastline, said Harry Roberts, a professor of Coastal Studies at Louisiana State University.

So much crude pouring into the ocean may alter the chemistry of the sea, with unforeseeable results, said Mak Saito, an Associate Scientist at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts.

No Guarantee

BP, based in London, says it can't guarantee the success of its attempt now underway to capture the flow of oil and divert it to a ship at the surface. Thad Allen, the U.S. government's national commander for the incident, said operations may need to be suspended to allow for an evacuation ahead of a tropical storm or hurricane, during which oil would continue to gush into the Gulf.

The so-called relief well being drilled to intercept and plug the damaged well by mid-August might miss — as other emergency wells have done before — requiring more time to make a second, third or fourth try, Dave Rensink, President Elect of the American Association of Petroleum Geologists, said.

Robert Wine, a spokesman for BP, declined to detail the company's own worst-case scenario.

In its original exploration plan for the Macondo well about 40-miles from the Louisiana coast,

BP estimated the worst-case scenario for an oil spill was 162,000 barrels of crude a day, according to a filing with the U.S. Interior Department's Minerals Management Service.

Hurricane Season

BP Chief Executive Officer Tony Hayward has more recently put the maximum potential leak rate at 60,000 barrels a day.

Wine reaffirmed BP's estimate that it will take 90 days to stop the leak with a relief well, which would be the first half of August. He said an early, vigorous hurricane season could have an impact on the schedule.

The ultimate worst-case scenario is that the well is never successfully plugged, said Fred Aminzadeh, a research professor at the University of Southern California's Center for Integrated Smart Oil Fields who previously worked for Unocal Corp. That would leave the well to flow for probably more than a decade, he said in a telephone interview.

More likely, the relief wells will eventually succeed, though it might take longer than the three months predicted by BP, he said.

Pemex Spill

It took Mexico's state-owned oil company, Petróleos Mexicanos, or Pemex, nine months to plug its Ixtoc I well after an explosion and fire in 1979.

The company's first attempt with a relief well failed, so it had to drill a second. Eventually, more than 140 million gallons of crude spilled into the Gulf of Mexico — the biggest offshore oil spill on record.

Last year, an explosion at a well off the Australian coast owned by Thailand's national oil company, PTT Exploration & Production Pcl, required five attempts before it could be plugged by a relief well 10 weeks after the spill began.

BP has improved its odds by drilling two emergency wells at once. If a first attempt fails, it will have the second well ready to try again. The company is using techniques such as a larger well bore, raising its chances of hitting its mark, said Robert MacKenzie an analyst with FBR Capital Markets in Arlington, Virginia.

Plugging the well is another challenge even after BP successfully intersects it, Robert Bea, a University of California Berkeley engineering professor, said. BP has said it believes the well bore to be damaged, which could hamper efforts to fill it with mud and set a concrete plug, Bea said.

Evacuating Ships

While these efforts are underway, BP could face delays if a hurricane enters the Gulf, forcing an evacuation. BP says it is developing a mechanism to quickly disconnect the ship collecting oil from the well so that it can evacuate ahead of a storm. That would leave the well gushing oil, Bea said.

Ocean biologists are concerned the oil could linger in deep layers in the sea, generating

oxygen-depleted “dead zones” that kill marine life.

Plumes of oil spinning off of the spill have been detected in two directions, and researchers suspect there are more.

“Clearly, oxygen levels are going to be decreased in the vicinity of the plume area, and it looks like it could be a very large plume area,” said Saito, of Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution.

Birds, Oysters

The crude oil could enter a current that would draw it out of the Gulf and up along the East Coast of the U.S. all the way to Nantucket, Roberts, of Louisiana State University, said.

The American Bird Conservancy has identified 10 key regions on the Gulf Coast where birds could be harmed. If the oil is spread widely by a hurricane, there could be long-term damage to bird populations, the non-profit organization has said.

“What is difficult to measure is the loss of future generations of birds when birds fail to lay eggs or when eggs fail to hatch,” George Fenwick, the organization’s president, said in a statement on at-risk areas in the Gulf Coast.

Marine life may take decades to recover, wiping out businesses along the coastline that depend on the fishing and seafood industry.

Al Sunseri, who runs P&J Oyster Co., the oldest continually operated oyster dealer in the U.S., said he could end up out of business:

“This could be the end of our 134-year-old business,” he said. “I’ve been doing this 30 years. I have a son and I don’t know if he’ll be able to carry on this next generation.”

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