

Did BP Cause Damage to the Gulf Sea Floor? Ever-Larger “Natural” Oil Seeps from the Giant Macondo Reservoir

By [Washington's Blog](#)

Global Research, March 10, 2012

[Washiington's Blog](#) 10 March 2012

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Environment](#), [Oil and Energy](#)

Has BP Made “Natural” Oil Seeps In the Gulf Larger?

In June of 2010, [BP officials admitted to damage beneath the seafloor](#) under BP’s Gulf Macondo well.

Nmerous scientists have speculated that [the blowout and subsequent clumsy attempts by BP to plug the well could have created new seeps, and made pre-existing natural seeps bigger](#).

We have repeatedly noted that [the Macondo oil reservoir may still be leaking](#).

American reporter Dahr Jamail [reports](#) in a must-read article at Al Jazeera:

Al Jazeera has spotted a large oil sheen near the infamous Macondo 252 well.

In September 2011, Al Jazeera spotted a large swath of silvery oil sheen located roughly 19km northeast of the now-capped well.

But now, on February 29, Al Jazeera conducted another over-flight of the area and found a larger area of sea covered in oil sheen in the same location.

Oil trackers with the organisation On Wings of Care, who have been monitoring the new oil since mid-August 2011, have for months found rainbow-tinted slicks and thick silvery globs of oil consistently visible in the area.

“This is the same crescent shaped area of oil and sheen I’ve been seeing here since the middle of last August,” Bonny Schumaker, president and pilot of On Wings of Care, told Al Jazeera while flying over the oil.

Schumaker has logged approximately 500 hours of flight time monitoring the area around the Macondo well, and has flown scientists from NASA, the US Geological Survey (USGS), and oil chemistry scientists to observe conditions resulting from BP’s oil disaster that began in April 2010.

When Al Jazeera flew to the area on September 11, 2011, the oil sheen was approximately 25km long and 10 to 50 metres wide, at a location roughly 19km northeast of the Macondo 252 well.

On the recent over flight, the area covered in oil sheen was approximately 35km long, and ranged from 20 to 100 metres wide in approximately the same location. At times, fumes from the oil filled the aircraft, even at an altitude of

350 metres.

Schumaker, a career physicist with NASA who retired in 2011, is deeply concerned because she has spotted oil in the same location now at least 15 times since last August.

Edward Overton, professor emeritus at Louisiana State University's environmental sciences department, examined data from oil samples taken from this area last September and confirmed that the oil is from the Macondo reservoir.

Experts believe the oil is likely to be from a seep in the seabed, but there is debate about what caused the seep, as many believe it may well have been caused by BP's blowout well and the failed attempts to cap it during spring 2010....

Overton, who is also a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) contractor, told Al Jazeera in September, "After examining the data, I think it's a dead ringer for the MC252 [Macondo Well] oil, as good a match as I've seen."

He explained that the samples were analysed and compared to "the known Macondo oil fingerprint, and it was a very, very close match".

While not ruling out the possibility that oil could be seeping out of the giant reservoir, which would be the worst-case scenario, Overton believed the oil currently reaching the surface was probably from oil that was trapped in the damaged rigging on the seafloor.

However, given the fact that the oil sheen has existed in this area since at least as early as August 2010 and is continuing, the likelihood of it being residual oil from the Deepwater Horizon or damaged rigging is now slim.

Other scientists remain concerned that the new oil could be coming from a seep from the same reservoir the Macondo well was drilled into. The oilfield, located 64km off the coast of Louisiana, is believed to hold as much 50 million barrels of producible oil reserves.

Natural oil seepage in the Gulf of Mexico is a common phenomenon and can cause sheens, but the current oil and sheen is suspect due to its size and location near the Macondo well.

"From what I've seen, this new oil and sheen definitely seemed larger than typical natural seepages found in the Gulf of Mexico," Dr Ira Leifer, a University of California scientist who is an expert on natural hydrocarbon oil and gas emissions from the seabed told Al Jazeera. "Because of the size and its location, there is a greater concern that should require a larger public investigation."

New Orleans attorney Stuart Smith, who litigates against major oil companies, believes the burden of proof about where the oil is coming from lies on BP.

"Our worst fears have proven true," Smith said of the seep. "We have a chronic leak scenario caused by the Macondo well, and it is time for the feds and BP to come clean and tell the American public the truth. Unless/until the government and BP explain in a verifiable manner what the source of this oil is, in my opinion any thoughts of settlement are way premature."

[US Coast Guard Captain Jonathan Burton] said after seeing footage from the submersible of BP's cap, he does not believe the Macondo well, or the relief wells BP drilled to stop it, are leaking, and he feels the oil is from natural seepage.

"Research shows the Macondo area is ripe for seeps, and I think that's what we're looking at here, and it's coming from the same reservoir," Burton said.

Burton, who was somewhat defensive for BP, added that he thinks that "the seep was there all along", and "doesn't know why BP has been silent on it."

Coast Guard Lieutenant Eric Brooks, also present in Al Jazeera's meeting with Captain Burton, later provided a link to [images of natural seeps] However, the figures shown on the website itself are for areas quite far west and south of the area in question. "

"We can tell you that we recently sent a remote operated submarine down to inspect the Macondo well cap and the relief well cap," Mueller, added, "Both are intact and show no evidence of any oil leak. So no oil is leaking from the Macondo well."

But experts believe that is exactly the problem, since the work BP conducted to cap the gushing well could have caused oil to begin seeping from the reservoir in an area away from the capped well.

Leifer remains concerned that the seep, given its proximity to the Macondo well, could be oil in the reservoir that entered a layer of mud and has migrated into a natural pathway that leads to the seabed.

"I see these new observations [of the seep] as the canary in the coal mine that indicates something could be changing at the seabed and should not be ignored and hope it goes away," he said.

Given Overton's findings that the oil does appear to be from Macondo, Leifer added, "It's not necessary to be alarmist, but this is something that deserves setting an alarm off to investigate".

Of Captain Burton's comments about the oil coming from the Macondo reservoir, Smith had this to say:

"What is significant in my mind, as an attorney, is that a US government official admitted this is Macondo oil, and to me, absent BP producing evidence this seep existed prior to their drilling, they therefore must have caused it."

Leifer's concerns are that if the seep increases in volume, "It could be a persistent, significant, continuous oil spill again, and that would require BP to go back and re-drill, and block off the pipeline even deeper than they already did, or else they would be liable for whatever the emissions are, forever, because it's not going to stop for a very long time".

Dr Ian MacDonald, a professor of biological oceanography at Florida State University who uses satellite remote sensing to locate natural oil releases on the ocean surface, confirmed that there are natural seeps in this region of the Gulf of Mexico, but believes more investigation is necessary in order to

determine the cause and source of this particular site.

“The question for science is: Are the rates of seepage consistent with what they were prior to the blowout?” MacDonald told Al Jazeera. “Is the amount of oil we’re seeing now unusual with respect to historic levels? Can this oil be traced back to these formations?”

[Leifer said] “There is natural migration in the area around Macondo, and one of the sites we’ve studied is MC118, about 18km away,” but added, “The concern is not that human activities caused a fault, but by creating pathways outside the [well] casing, they are allowing oil to travel along the well pipe then migrate horizontally until it intersects an existing vertical fault migration pathway, then reach the sea bed.”

His concern, shared by other scientists, is the possibility that the volume of oil flowing from the seep, if it is related to the Macondo area, could increase with time.

“We should be having sonar works done of that area, and the public needs to be informed of the findings,” Leifer said. “That survey should be repeated every three or six months to confirm that the seepage is not becoming larger and more widespread.”

“I don’t understand why we’re seeing so much more oil out there right now than we’ve seen in the past,” MacDonald said. “We need to dig in and investigate and see what is going on.”

Smith agreed, and took it a step further.

“We demand a National Academy of Science investigation into this seep,” and added, “BP has had six months to come up with evidence to prove they did not cause this seep. Considering that Al Jazeera and Associated Press have reported this [seep], you’d think BP would produce evidence they did not cause it.”

The possibility that brings the greatest concern is that oil is leaking from the reservoir straight out of the ground. This situation could be impossible to stop, because the vent would increase in size over time due to the highly pressurised reservoir.

Washington’s Blog [interviewed](#) one of the world’s leading experts on oil leaks in 2010, Robert Bea. Dr. Bea noted that we may never be able to fully stop BP’s oil leak:

Few people in the world know more about oil drilling disasters than Dr. Robert Bea.

Bea teaches engineering at the University of California Berkeley, and has 55 years of experience in engineering and management of design, construction, maintenance, operation, and decommissioning of engineered systems including offshore platforms, pipelines and floating facilities. Bea has worked for many years in governmental and quasi-governmental roles, and has been a high-level [governmental adviser](#) concerning disasters. He worked for 16 years as a top mechanical engineer and manager for Shell Oil, and has worked with Bechtel and the Army Corps of Engineers. One of the world’s top experts in

[offshore drilling problems](#), Bea is a [member](#) of the [Deepwater Horizon Study Group](#), and has been interviewed by news media around the world concerning the BP oil disaster.

WB: Is it possible that this fractured, subsea salt geology will make it difficult to permanently kill the oil leak using relief wells?

Bea: Yes, it could. The Santa Barbara channel seeps are still leaking, decades after the oil well was supposedly capped. This well could keep leaking for years.

Scripps mapped out seafloor seeps in the area of the well prior to the blowout. Some of the natural seeps penetrate 10,000 to 15,000 feet beneath the seafloor. The oil will follow lines of weakness in the geology. The leak can travel several horizontal miles from the location of the leak.

[In other words, the geology beneath the seafloor is so fractured, with soft and unstable salt formations, that we may never be able to fully kill the well even with relief wells. Instead, the loss of containment of the oil reservoir caused by the drilling accident could cause oil to leak out through seeps for years to come. See [this](#) and [this](#) for further background].

WB: I have heard that BP is [underestimating](#) the size of the oil reservoir (and see [this](#)). Is it possible that the reservoir is bigger than BP is estimating, and so – if not completely killed – the leak could therefore go on for longer than most assume?

Bea: That’s plausible.

WB: The chief electronics technician on the Deepwater Horizon said that the Macondo well was originally drilled in another location, but that “going faster caused the bottom of the well to split open, swallowing tools”, and that BP abandoned that well. You’ve spoken to that technician and looked into the incident, and concluded that “they damn near blew up the rig.” [See [this](#) and [this](#)].

Do you know where that abandoned well location is, and do you know if that well is still leaking?

Bea: The abandoned well is very close to the current well location. BP had to file reports showing the location of the abandoned well and the new well [with the Minerals Management Service], so the location of the abandoned well is known.

We don’t know if the abandoned well is leaking.

WB: Matthew Simmons [talked](#) about a second leaking well. There are rumors on the Internet that the original well is still leaking. Do you have any information that can either disprove or confirm that allegation?

Bea: There are two uncorroborated reports. One is that there is a leak 400 feet West of the present well’s surface location. There is another report that there is a leak several miles to the West.

[Bea does not know whether either report is true at this time, because BP is not sharing information with the government, let alone the public.]

Postscript: Self-described “petroleum industry geohazards engineer” BK Lim has picked up the conspiracy theory mantle from Simmons, claiming there were [three leaking wells](#). We haven’t read Lim’s statements, and so offer no comment on his credibility.

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