

Coast Guard rejects BP oil leak response plan as too small

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By Mark Seibel | McClatchy Newspapers

This photo from a BP PowerPoint presentation shows the ships now collecting oil at the Deepwater Horizon well site. | BP |

WASHINGTON — The Coast Guard has told oil giant BP that its proposed plan for containing the runaway Deepwater Horizon well does not take into account new higher estimates of how much oil is gushing into the Gulf of Mexico and demanded that the company provide a more aggressive plan within 48 hours.

In a letter dated Friday and released Saturday, Coast Guard Rear Adm. James A. Watson also said that BP was taking too much time to ready ships to capture oil spewing from the well.

"You indicate that some of the systems you have planned to deploy may take a month or more to bring online," Watson, who is the federal on-scene coordinator for the Deepwater Horizon disaster, wrote Doug Suttles, BP's chief operating officer. "Every effort must be expended to speed up the process."

The 48-hour deadline is the second the Coast Guard has given BP in the past week and indicates a growing recognition on the part of the Coast Guard that both BP and the Obama administration underestimated for weeks the amount of oil pouring from the well, which began leaking when an April 20 explosion shattered the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig, killing 11 workers. The rig sank two days later, taking a mile of well pipeline with it.

For weeks, the Obama administration and BP said the spill was leaking 5,000 barrels a day — about 210,000 gallons. On May 27, a government task force of scientists revised that estimate to a minimum of 12,000 to 25,000 barrels a day, and possibly much more. Then on Thursday, the government doubled those estimates to between 20,000 and 50,000 barrels a day, saying those, too, may understate the size of the leak because a decision to shear off the well's riser pipe to add a "top hat" containment device may have unleashed more oil.

Watson said the new estimates were the reason for the new deadline, saying the plan Suttles outlined was only "consistent with previous flow rate estimates."

"Because those estimates have now been revised . . . it is clear that additional capacity is urgently needed," he said.

There was no immediate public response from BP and it was unclear what action, if any, the Coast Guard could take if BP failed to respond within 48 hours, a deadline that will expire on Sunday. BP and Coast Guard representatives have been meeting throughout the week, Coast Guard officials have said, to refine the plan, which Suttles outlined in a letter to Watson dated Wednesday — before the new flow rate estimates were released. In his letter, Suttles said the plan had been outlined on Tuesday to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and Energy Secretary Steven Chu. "No objections were raised," he wrote.

Under that proposal, BP foresaw raising the amount of oil it could capture from the Deepwater Horizon well to 20,000 to 28,000 barrels a day by the end of next week. That oil would be captured by a drilling ship at the site, the Discoverer Enterprise, which has been collecting around its stated 15,000-barrels-per-day capacity through the "top hat" but that Coast Guard officials believe can be pushed to 18,000 barrels a day, and by a second vessel, the Q4000 drilling platform, which would take on 5,000 to 10,000 barrels a day. That oil would be burned into the atmosphere.

Containment capacity would be pushed further, under the BP plan, by the addition of a third vessel, the drill ship Discoverer Clear Leader, which would take on an additional 5,000 to 10,000 barrels a day when it is operational in mid July.

In offering an estimate of total capacity once the three vessels are in operation of 25,000 to 38,000 barrels, BP's plan is more cautious than numbers Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen has used in press briefings with reporters. On Friday, Allen said capacity would reach 38,000 barrels a day once the Discoverer Clear Leader is operational.

BP's estimates, however, may be more realistic. While Allen has said that the Discoverer Enterprise may have a capacity to receive 18,000 barrels per day, the actual amount it's recovered has actually declined by a few hundred barrels since it peaked at 15,800 barrels on Wednesday. On Friday, the ship recovered 15,500 barrels, BP reported Saturday.

Read more: www.mcclatchydc.com/2010/06/12/95789/coast-guard-rejects-bp-oil-leak.html#ixzz0qfELCxQH