



BP's oil spill couldn't have come at a worse time for the local fisherman whose lucrative seasons were about to begin here in Venice, La. (By Bill Delano, USA TODAY)

Urgency increases as oil spill grows

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[Enlarge](#) By Chris Graythen, Getty Images

Eddie Soto, working with Resolve Marine Group, carries oil containment booms to the edge of Lake Pontchartrain in New Orleans on Sunday.

By [Donna Leinwand](#), [Rick Jervis](#) and [Brian Winter](#), USA TODAY

GULFPORT, Miss. — As dead sea turtles washed ashore, oil sloshed over inflatable barriers and the government ordered fishermen to stay home indefinitely, communities along the [Gulf Coast](#) and beyond braced for an environmental and economic tragedy that is growing worse by the day.

Robot-controlled submarines made little progress in sealing the gash on the ocean floor that is leaking at least 200,000 gallons of oil a day — and possibly much more — since an oil rig exploded nearly two weeks ago off the [Louisiana](#) coast.

BP PLC said Monday that it will pay for all the cleanup costs from the spill that could continue spewing crude for at least another week.

Chief executive [Tony Hayward](#) said Monday that chemical dispersants have worked to some degree to keep oil from flowing to the surface, though he did not elaborate. He said on ABC's [Good Morning America](#) that the new approach seemed to be having a significant impact.

The update on the dispersants came as BP, which owns the rig, was preparing a system never tried nearly a mile under water to siphon away the geyser of crude from a blown-out well a mile under Gulf of [Mexico](#) waters. However, the plan to lower 74-ton, concrete-and-metal boxes being built to capture the oil and

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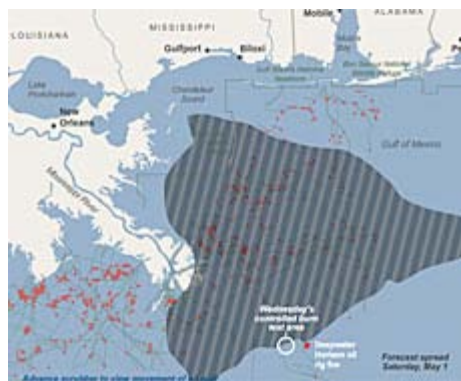
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siphon it to a barge waiting at the surface will need at least another six to eight days to get it in place.

President Obama visited the area Sunday and vowed to do "whatever it takes for as long as it takes to stop this crisis."

Obama told a group of local fishermen that the challenge is: "How do we plug this hole?" His Interior secretary, [Ken Salazar](#), had a disheartening answer: It could take 90 days.

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Officials from Louisiana to [Florida](#) voiced frustration with the slow response by BP, and said they were frantically exploring long-shot disaster prevention efforts of their own as blustery winds pushed the oil slick closer to shore.

"We need to do something to help ourselves," said Ryan LaFontaine, a spokesman for the city of [Gulfport](#).

He said a company had offered to build a 25-mile underwater barrier to protect the coast near Gulfport for \$5 million. But LaFontaine said BP — which must pay for all cleanup efforts, because it's responsible for the leak — would not pay for it because the technology was unproven.

"Our feeling is: Why don't we try to prove it now?" LaFontaine said. "Now seems like the time to give it a shot."

Meanwhile, bad news poured in for a region that has been especially hard-hit — first by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, then by the recession. The thickest oil has so far stayed out to sea, avoiding sensitive coastal marshes. But concerns over polluted waters led the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration \(NOAA\)](#) to ban commercial and recreational fishing in a broad expanse of ocean for "a minimum of 10 days."

Rep. [Charlie Melancon](#), D-La., said hundreds of millions of dollars in emergency funds likely will be needed to "help repair countless lives that are being ruined by this."

"The best-case scenario is that this lasts for a couple of weeks," said Melancon, whose district includes the Louisiana coast. "The worst case is that we've got several months to go."

Despite the efforts of the world's richest government and one of the world's richest energy companies, the path of the oil slick and the devastation it wreaks likely will depend on two factors beyond anyone's control — winds and ocean currents, said Doug Helton, incidents operations coordinator for NOAA.

Gusty winds Sunday prevented many boats in Venice, La., near the mouth of the Mississippi River, from leaving port to lay down inflatable booms to protect the coastline. Forecasts indicated the spill would touch coastal marshes off Louisiana's St. Bernard Parish by today, Helton said.

"It's like predicting rainfall," he said. "We know it's going to start raining, but we don't know who's going to feel the first raindrops."

Florida Gov. [Charlie Crist](#) said: "I think we're going to see it. I wish we weren't. ... The sooner they can plug that thing, the better for everybody."

The spill's effects eventually could be felt as far north as the Arctic Circle, because birds such as sandpipers often stop in Gulf wetlands on their migration routes, said Carl Safina, an ecologist and founder of the Blue Ocean Institute. "If a bird gets covered in oil, that can result in an empty nest site thousands of miles away," he said.

Lamar McKay, president and chairman of BP America, said the company was "throwing every resource that we've got at this."

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McKay told ABC's *This Week* the company was building a 74-ton metal and concrete box that could be placed over the leaking well in about a week. He said crews were trying to activate the rig's "blowout preventer," a safety mechanism that is designed to prevent such leaks but apparently failed in this instance.

He compared the effort with "open-heart surgery at 5,000 feet ... in the dark, with robot-controlled submarines."

Dispute with fishermen

BP and the federal government have struggled to contain damage since the Deepwater Horizon exploded April 20, killing 11 workers, and sunk to the sea floor two days later.

BP spokeswoman Marti Powers said the company has brought in 1.2 million feet of boom to spread across the Gulf Coast and will bring in more, as needed. About 275,000 feet of boom already has been placed offshore, according to the Coast Guard.

Garret Graves, the head of the Office of Coastal Activities for Louisiana Gov. [Bobby Jindal](#), said that amount is insufficient because Louisiana alone has 30 million feet of tidal shoreline. Heavy waves have broken up many of the existing booms. BP is "clearly overwhelmed," he said.

The company also created controversy by initially asking fishermen who participate in oil cleanup and prevention efforts to sign a waiver that included a confidentiality agreement, said Stuart Smith, a New Orleans-based environmental lawyer who represents commercial fishermen.

The waiver also was aimed at preventing fishermen who signed it from filing legal claims against BP once a 30-day period had lapsed, Smith said. He filed a court motion Sunday to stop BP from requiring any fishermen who participate in the cleanup effort to sign the agreement.

"Requiring the volunteer responders, already victims of the oil disaster caused by BP, to potentially lose or in any way limit their claims against BP ... is unconscionable," the motion said.

Powers said late Sunday that BP no longer was requiring fishermen to sign any waivers. The program was launched Friday and hired its first 50 vessels Sunday, she said. Eighty more were expected to be hired by Monday and more as needed, she said.

One of the fishermen who signed up was Billy Delacruz, 49, a shrimper from Empire, La. He was sitting on his 54-foot trawler, surrounded by other moored boats that normally would be out pulling shrimp from nearby bays and bayous.

Hurricane Katrina destroyed Delacruz's previous shrimp trawler, his oyster boat and his home, exacting \$500,000 in damage, he said. Delacruz said he was just starting to catch up on his bills when the this spill occurred.

He hopes he gets the call from BP, a job that promises \$2,000 a day — about what he makes on a good shrimp run, he said. How he'll make a living in the weeks and months ahead is uncertain.

"Don't know what to expect yet," Delacruz said. "But I know it ain't going to be nothing nice."

Amount leaking unclear

Estimates as to how much oil is leaking out, made more difficult by the depth of the accident, remain in doubt. McKay, the BP executive, said simply: "I don't know the volume."

SkyTruth, a group that investigates environmental incidents, used satellite imagery and Coast Guard aerial photos to estimate that the damaged well is gushing about 1.1 million gallons a day — five times the current estimate from the Coast Guard. [John Amos](#), the group's president, said it derived the figure with the help of the oceanography department at Florida State University.

At that rate, the total amount of oil spilled in the Gulf already would have surpassed the 11 million gallons spilled by the Exxon Valdez oil tanker in Alaska in 1989, he said.

Smith, the environmental lawyer, said he worries the spill's magnitude could cause health problems for both emergency crews and Gulf Coast residents.

People in New Orleans could smell the oil on Thursday, and likely will once again when the wind stops blowing as hard, Smith said. Libby Milner Roland, a Gulfport city councilwoman, said the smell in her beachfront district Sunday was "worse than standing at the gas station."

"If you can smell it, you're being exposed," Smith said. "Everybody's talking about the damage to birds and fish, but nobody's worrying about the people."

Tests have not shown any damage to the region's air quality, said a statement by the Center for Toxicology and Environmental Health. It said it took 813 samples of air on Saturday from Venice to Pensacola, Fla., and did not detect significant concentrations of crude oil chemicals.

Jane Lubchenco, head of NOAA, also said "there should be no health risk in seafood currently in the marketplace."

Safina, the ecologist, said there still was a chance that a wider disaster could be averted, but that the wind would have to shift direction and the oil leak would need to be plugged as soon as possible. "That's a lot of improbable steps," he said.

In Gulfport, the City Council has asked an economist to determine the value of the city's shrimp and oyster industries, and instructed the city's legal department to prepare papers to give notice of a claim with BP, Councilman F.B. "Rusty" Walker said.

"We're expecting the worst and preparing for it, but hoping for the best," he said. "This is not our first rodeo."

Contributing: Associated Press



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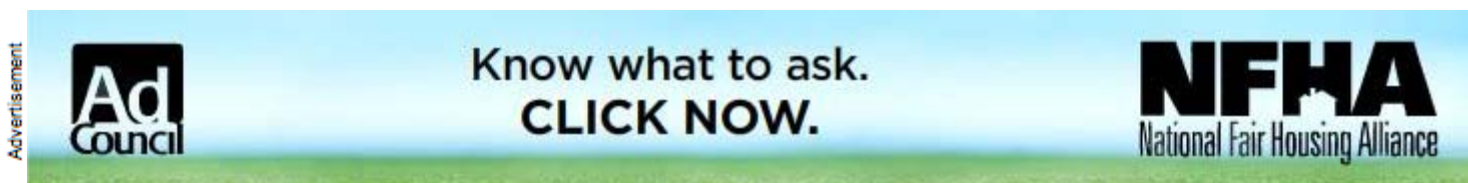
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