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May 2, 2010

BP Describes Race to Fix Well as Obama Warns of Oil Damage

By **CAMPBELL ROBERTSON** and **HENRY FOUNTAIN**

NEW ORLEANS — BP prepared Monday to install a shutoff valve on one of three leaks gushing from an oil spill off the coast of New Orleans, in a bid to stem what President Obama called a "potentially unprecedented environmental disaster."

The effort comes as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said the oil slick appears to be drifting toward the Alabama and Florida coasts, including the Chandeleur Islands off Louisiana's southern tip.

President Obama visited Louisiana on Sunday afternoon for a firsthand look at the response effort, while officials for BP described in detail their desperate efforts to seal the gushing well.

"The oil that is still leaking from the well could seriously damage the economy and the environment of our gulf states and it could extend for a long time," Mr. Obama said. "It could jeopardize the livelihoods of thousands of Americans who call this place home."

On Monday, BP said it would pay "all necessary and appropriate clean-up costs" from the disaster. "BP takes responsibility for responding to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. We will clean it up," the company said in a statement.

BP was leasing the Deepwater Horizon oil rig that exploded on April 20. Two days later, it collapsed into the gulf, and the oil began leaking. BP, working with an array of government agencies and private companies, has been unable to stop the flow of crude from the well.

Bob Fryar, the company's senior vice president for operations in Angola, who was brought to a command center in Houston for the engineering effort, said that on Monday, BP hoped to install a shut-off valve on one of the three leaks. That may stop some of the oil flow, Mr. Fryar said.

But the biggest leak, at the end of the riser pipe, which Mr. Fryar said was the source of most of the spewing oil, cannot be shut off this way. The company intends to address that leak by lowering a containment dome over it and then pumping the oil to the surface. That effort is still at least six days away, Mr. Fryar said. Another containment dome, for the third leak, which is on the riser near the wellhead, would follow two to four days after the first.

The root of the problem appears to be a towering stack of heavy equipment 5,000 feet below the surface of the gulf known as a blowout preventer. It is a steel-framed stack of valves, rams, housings, tanks and hydraulic tubing that is designed to seal the well quickly in the event of a burst of pressure. It did not work when the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded.

Mr. Fryar and Charlie Holt, BP's drilling operations manager for the gulf, described an audacious plan to confront the blowout preventer problem. In this approach, they would seal the well by cutting the riser at the wellhead, sliding a huge piece of equipment called the riser package out of the way and bolting a second blowout preventer atop the first one.

The risk in attempting such a maneuver — which would be performed, as all the undersea work has been, by robotic submersibles tethered to support ships 5,000 feet above — is that the pressure of the oil rising from the well could be overwhelming, and the well could gush oil at a far higher rate. Mr. Fryar said a pressure gauge would be installed soon to determine if it was safe to attempt the operation.

Speaking of the accident, Mr. Fryar said the blowout preventer “has lots of redundancies, there are lots of opportunities to shut these off. None of these worked.”

Whether the equipment was faulty or it was damaged in the accident was unclear.

Officials still plan to drill relief wells, which would allow crews to plug the gushing cavity with heavy liquid. Drilling of a first relief well was set to begin “as soon as the weather clears,” Mr. Fryar said. Drilling for a second well was expected to begin in two weeks. The relief wells, however, will take months to execute.

Cleanup efforts were hampered again Sunday by bad weather and 7- to 10-foot swells, which prevented planes from dropping chemical dispersants and oil skimmers from corralling the slick on the surface.

Mr. Fryar said that for a second day, crews were injecting chemical dispersant into the oil as it flowed from the main leak. Dispersant, which is more conventionally used on the water surface, breaks the oil into small droplets and reduces its buoyancy, so it will sink to the bottom.

Mr. Fryar said technicians were trying to determine whether it would be possible to inject the

dispersant directly into the riser deep under the water so that it would mix better with the flowing oil. “We think this dispersant is highly effective,” he said. “We’re hoping the oil won’t make it to the surface.”

The impact of chemical dispersants on deepwater ecology is unclear.

Closer to land, crews continued to put out booms to stop the oil and were training volunteers in Mississippi and Florida to help minimize the impact if the slick reaches the beach, said John Curry, head of external affairs at BP.

Speaking to reporters in the rain in Venice, La., after talking with response teams that have amassed on the coast to try to stem the tide of oil lapping the shoreline, Mr. Obama vowed that the government would keep up the pressure on BP.

While he did not criticize the company in his public remarks, Mr. Obama’s comments reflected increased frustration in the administration with BP’s inability to plug the oil leak. The president again reiterated that American taxpayers would not foot the bill.

“BP is responsible for this leak — BP will be paying the bill,” Mr. Obama said.

Mr. Obama had initially not planned to visit the region until later this week at the earliest, White House officials said Friday afternoon. But by late Friday night, with criticism mounting that the government’s response was too slow, White House officials decided that the president needed to make the trip to the gulf on Sunday.

White House officials sent two Cabinet officials to appear on the Sunday television talk shows with the message that the administration was doing everything it could to take control of the spill and that it had been involved from the beginning. Homeland Security Secretary [Janet Napolitano](#) said on Fox News Sunday that the government had an “all hands on deck” approach to the disaster.

For Mr. Obama, the widening environmental calamity in the gulf is made even more complicated, politically, by the fact that the spill occurred just a month after he announced he was expanding [offshore drilling](#). He now says that no new leases will be approved until a thorough review of the causes of the BP leak is complete.

“Every American affected by this spill should know this: Your government will do whatever it takes, for as long as it takes to stop this crisis,” Mr. Obama said after his briefing by federal and state officials. He said the spill endangered the “heartbeat of the region’s economic life.”

Mr. Obama met with Governor [Bobby Jindal](#) of Louisiana upon the arrival of [Air Force One](#) in

New Orleans. Then he went to Venice for two hours — by road, rather than helicopter, because of inclement weather — to look at the response.

He stopped to speak to several fishermen, assuring them that BP would reimburse them for lost earnings. But reimbursement may be one of the largest battles to come, given that federal law sets a limit of \$75 million on BP's liability for damages, apart from the cleanup costs.

“It's going to be extremely tricky” to reimburse fishermen and others if economic damages tally above \$75 million, said Stuart Smith, a New Orleans-based lawyer who is pushing for Congressional action to amend the law. “They may not be obligated to pay more than that unless they agree to do it.”

There is a federal fund, generated from a tax on oil, that may cover as much as \$1 billion in damages.

Campbell Robertson reported from New Orleans, and Henry Fountain from New York. Reporting was also contributed by Helene Cooper in Washington and Sam Dolnick in Baton Rouge, La. .

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: May 2, 2010

An earlier version of this article incorrectly identified the location where Bob Fryar works for BP. He is the company's senior vice president for operations in Angola, the country, not Angola, La.