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Gulf Awaits Word on Results of 'Top Kill' Effort

By **CLIFFORD KRAUSS** and **JOHN M. BRODER**

HOUSTON — Cleanup crews, fishermen and residents along the oil-slicked Gulf Coast waited anxiously on Thursday morning for word on whether BP's latest effort to plug a gushing underwater oil well had succeeded.

BP began the maneuver, known as a top kill, on Wednesday, amid hopes that injecting heavy drilling fluids deep into the well could stem the relentless flow of oil that has devastated commercial fishing in the Gulf, fouled miles of coastline and put the company and federal regulators at the center of a political firestorm.

BP warned that that success was not guaranteed and that it could fail at any moment. But engineers and geologists following the effort, in which heavy fluids are injected into the well, said the likelihood of success grew with each passing hour.

"The operation is proceeding as we planned it," said Tony Hayward, BP's chief executive, in a statement Wednesday evening. "We will be continuing for at least another 24 hours."

A BP spokeswoman said that the operation had continued through the night, but said there were "no significant events" to report on its progress.

Doug Suttles, BP's chief operating officer for exploration and production, said at a news conference Wednesday evening that it would be a day or more before it was clear whether the top kill had worked. "It's too early to know if it's going to be successful," Mr. Suttles said.

He said that more than 7,000 barrels of drilling mud had been pumped at varying rates.

At the same news conference, Rear Admiral Mary E. Landry of the Coast Guard, the federal on-scene coordinator, said that she was encouraged but that she did not want to express optimism until the well was secured.

The outcome of the effort may become known about the time [President Obama](#) is scheduled to discuss new restrictions on [offshore drilling](#) at a news conference Thursday after receiving a report on drilling safety from Interior Secretary [Ken Salazar](#).

Mr. Obama is expected to extend the informal moratorium that he declared after the BP spill began on new offshore drilling permits in the gulf and off the North Slope of Alaska until the cause of the accident is determined and stricter safety and environmental safeguards are in place.

Political pressures already building on the administration and Congress to do more to deal with the potential devastation facing the gulf and somehow punish BP will likely intensify if the top kill effort fails. And the company would have to try to devise yet another possible solution to a leak that began after an explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig five weeks ago.

After days of delays and testing — and the weighing of several options — BP began shooting as much as 50,000 barrels of heavy drilling fluids into the drill pipes and hoses above the well at 1 p.m. Central time. The procedure has worked around the world to stop leaking wells, but never at the pressures and temperatures found a mile underwater.

Government and BP officials agreed to move forward with the top kill after engineers said their tests showed that the chance of stopping the oil leak was greater than the risk of making it worse.

A 30,000 horsepower engine on a ship floating above the well is pressure-pouring heavy liquids known in the oil business as “drilling mud” or “kill mud” down through drill pipes and hoses attached to the five-story-high blowout preventer sitting on top of the well. Once the liquids have forced the oil back, the well can be cemented and shut off.

Technicians guiding submarine robots completed diagnostic tests Wednesday morning and determined that the damaged blowout preventer and piping could withstand the pressure of the

injection of thousands of pounds of heavy drilling fluids. The Coast Guard and federal agencies monitoring the effort agreed.

Minutes before the maneuver began, one technician working with BP said he was concerned that the effort could fail within minutes. Engineers had warned that the pressurized flow of liquids might not overcome the pressure of the oil and gas rushing from below the seabed.

But throughout the afternoon, as the blowout preventer filled with mud at increasing pressures apparently with no rupture, engineers following the procedure were more hopeful.

"They are probably pressured up to full pressure, and nothing has ruptured yet," said Donald Van Nieuwenhuise, director of petroleum geoscience programs at the [University of Houston](#), four hours after the maneuver began. "It's a good sign because it means everything is holding together."

He predicted that engineers working on the effort would know by early morning whether it will be successful.

"Whether they tell us or not, I don't know," he said. "They are going to wait till they are absolutely sure it is working rather than say, 'The war is over.' "

If the top kill fails, the company may try to use another giant steel contraption known as a containment dome to trap the spewing oil. A similar effort failed three weeks ago when an icy slush of gas and water clogged the container. Officials said a new technique may enable them to succeed next time. But the dome would not plug the well — it is merely a temporary means of containing the spill.

Regardless of the top kill's success, Mr. Obama is expected to announce that all offshore exploration plans must be accompanied by a more thorough scientific and environmental analysis, as well as studies of the possible effects on marine life and ecosystems.

Mr. Obama will also repeat his call to Congress to change a law that requires the [Interior Department](#) to act within 30 day on applications for oil and gas exploration plans offshore and on public lands.

Mr. Obama, who has come under increasing criticism for the administration's handling of the

oil spill response, said that drilling at ever-deeper depths has brought dangers that were not fully clear until the accident.

“With the increased risks, the increased costs, it gives you a sense of where we’re going,” Mr. Obama said during a visit to a solar panel manufacturer in California. “We’re not going to be able to sustain this kind of fossil fuel use.”

He said the administration was determined to stop the flow of oil and assure that the damage is repaired.

“We’re going to bring every resource necessary to put a stop to this thing,” he said. “But a lot of damage has been done already — livelihoods destroyed, landscapes scarred, wildlife affected. Lives have been lost.

“Our thoughts and prayers are very much with the people along the Gulf Coast. And then let me reiterate, we will not rest until this well is shut, the environment is repaired and the cleanup is complete.”

Clifford Krauss reported from Houston, and John M. Broder from Washington. Jackie Calmes contributed reporting from Fremont, Calif., and Campbell Robertson from Robert, La..