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Press Briefing by National Incident Commander June 2, 2010

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NEW ORLEANS, La.
- Adm. Thad Allen, national incident commander for Deepwater BP oil spill response, and Dr. Jane Lubchenco, the NOAA administrator, provided an update on ongoing Deepwater BP oil spill response efforts in the BP Training Facility (Unified Incident Command Houma) in Schriever, La. at 8:30 a.m. CDT.

Click here to listen to the audio file.

The entire transcript follows:

OPERATOR: Ladies and gentleman, this is the operator. Today's conference is scheduled to begin momentarily. Until that time your lines will, again, be placed on music hold. Thank you for your patience.

U.S. COAST GUARD LIEUTENANT COMMANDER ANTHONY RUSSELL:

What we're going to be doing this morning—we'll provide a brief overview and update by [U.S. Coast Guard] Admiral [Thad] Allen and then Dr. [Jane] Lubchenco, the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] NOAA administrator, will also be talking about some of the science reports that we've been getting in the response operation here. Then we're going to open it up for 10 minutes of Q&A from the room and then 10 minutes of Q&A from the phones.

Thank you very much.

ADM. ALLEN: Good morning. The briefing this morning is coming from our incident command post at Houma, Louisiana, which is co-located at the BP training facility. The incident command post here in Houma is the tactical operational node for response operations in the state of Louisiana.

From here we have four deployed staging areas and bases. The most prominent right now would be the one down in Venice, which is the advanced staging area for the operations that are going on in response to the oil that's come into the Southwest Pass in the area and lower Plaquemines Parish.

I'd like to provide you a quick operation update. I want to hit a couple of items that are important—that you should know about and then, Jane Lubchenco, is going to give you a brief on NOAA's involvement with this and give you some technical operational issues associated with NOAA's role in this.

First of all, let me go right to the containment operations that are going on right now. Over the night, we were successfully able to do a sheer cut of the marine riser pipe. And there is 5,000 feet of pipe that's crumpled on the ocean floor that used to connect the oil head to the mobile drilling unit.

We are in the process right now of trying to do the second fine cut with a diamond-wire saw. That saw blade is becoming stuck inside the riser pipe. They're working to move the riser pipe to set it free. Anybody that has ever used a saw knows every once in a while it will bind up. That's kind of what's happening there. They're trying to maneuver the riser pipe to free it or, if they need to,

they'll send another blade down. They're working that problem right now.

The goal is, later on today, to finish that cut and then to be able to put a containment device over the top of the wellhead and start containing the oil—bring it to the surface and actually flare off the gas and actually produce product moving forward. We're doing that and we'll continue to provide updates as we go throughout the day.

Tactical things that we're working right now: we had our first oil contact in the state of Mississippi and Mississippi Sound—and some islands to the west. And we've had some tarballs and some sheening in Alabama. We are deploying skimmers offshore to try and intercept the sheen and any emulsified oil out there as far offshore as we can. We're also re-deployed boom to the extent that it's required to support Alabama and Mississippi. This has required a lot of tactical movement of boom in the last seven to 10 days—as first, Louisiana has been impacted and now the threat is shifting to Mississippi and Alabama. We continue to work with the state through our local incident commander over there who is headquartered in Mobile, Alabama.

Some other things that are going on. Tracy Wareing, who works for FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency], has been down here working claims with us. She is at Grand Isle today and is basically riding the circuit in the southern part of Louisiana to make sure that the claims processing system is working well and being responsive to the needs of the people down there. Again, this is a follow-up to the meeting we had with the president in Grand Isle last week, and requests from the different parish presidents and the mayor of Grand Isle—that we take a look to make sure the claims are functioning as effectively as possible.

I would just remind everybody, any information regarding the claims process is available at deepwaterhorizonresponse.com, which is the website we set up that has a variety of information available to everybody regarding claims.

So, with that, I'd like to turn the podium over to, Jane Lubchenco, for a briefing on NOAA operations.

ADMINISTRATOR LUBCHENCO: Thanks, Admiral Allen. Hello, everyone. My name is Jane Lubchenco. I'm the undersecretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and the administrator of NOAA; the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

I'm one of the scientists in the Obama administration. The president made it clear from the very beginning of his administration that good government depends on good science. And that has certainly been the case throughout the federal government's response to the BP Deep Water Horizon's spill.

The president has made historic efforts to engage scientists and engineers, both inside the governments as well as outside—from research institutions, academic institutions and the private sector in ways to understand the implications, to mitigate the spill and also to actually stop the spill.

At the president's direction and under the coordination of Admiral Allen, [Department of Energy] Secretary [Steven] Chu, [Environmental Protection Agency] Administrator [Lisa] Jackson, [U.S. Geological Survey] Director Marsha McNutt and I have been engaging scientists from throughout the federal family as well as the academic institutions to leverage the best minds in the country to help deal with this tragedy. Clearly, our number one priority is stopping the leak—or containing it. And we are leveraging the best scientific and engineering capacity to do that.

At the request of President Obama, Secretary Chu assembled a team of more than 200 top scientists from federal labs and academia to analyze the response that BP has proposed, and recommends additional actions for stopping or containing the leak. For example, Secretary Chu's team convinced BP to use high-energy gamma rays to image parts of the internal state of the [Blow-Out Preventer] BOP. Lab personnel have independently analyzed the 2D gamma ray images—crucial in helping us understand what is happening inside the BOP and informing the approach moving ahead.

The scientific effort has also focused squarely on measuring and mitigating the impacts of the oil. On the week of May 17th, the office—the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy convened a meeting of some of the nation's leading experts from oceanographic research institutions and from academia, as well as federal agencies and BP, on measuring and mitigating the impact of oil in the marine and coastal ecosystems.

Their discussions focused very much on how to use existing understanding and capabilities, what further research is needed to understand what the implications oil might have for ecosystems—on how to strengthen the public-private academic partnerships to those ends.

Let me highlight a few of the efforts that are underway on the science front across the federal agency. The administration understands, for environmental, legal and financial reasons, how important it is to get good measurements of the rate of leaks of the flow rate. To that end, we put together an independent governmental review panel, with no input from BP, to study the flow rate. This is the so-called Flow Rate Technical Group, which was headed by Dr. Marcia McNutt at the USGS in the Department of Interior.

The team is leading a coordinated effort across the federal government and academia to determine oil flow rates from the spill by

collecting and analyzing data and running state-of-the-art models, as well as conducting the independent peer review of all reports and findings of the modeling team.

To understand better where oil is and what impact it might be having—a number of efforts are underway. For example, the NOAA ship Gordon Gunter is at sea right now conducting acoustic surveys and collecting water samples throughout the water column, and doing net tows to sample pelagic species throughout the water column.

Scientific personnel are onboard to assist with the acoustic survey and utilize a really cool Autonomous Underwater Vehicle called the "Gulper," which is operated by the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute Team to collect discrete samples at different depths in the water column. This cruise on a NOAA ship is like many of the other efforts underway there—it is a collaborative effort across different research institutions, academic institutions and the federal government.

Later today the NOAA ship Thomas Jefferson will leave New Orleans for its 10-day research mission—another team of government and academic scientists to study the location and the movement of oils and dispersed oils below the surface.

NOAA's also coordinated research efforts with the University of South Florida—the vessel called the Weather Bird II that conducted sampling work to assess and monitor the oil spill.

Other efforts underway in the federal government include a focus on monitoring of air and water quality. Many of these are being led by EPA, but involve not only EPA but NOAA, Department of Homeland Security and Department of the Interior. There have been weekly calls held to share information about this water and air quality sampling to be able to share information in real-time fashion with the American public, with stakeholders in the region, with non-governmental organizations and others who are interested in an effort to continually keep people apprised of what is happening.

Efforts are also underway to assess any and all potential impacts to human health. These are being coordinated by CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention], the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and the Food and Drug Administration—are all working on different aspects of how humans might be impacted by this oil spill.

And finally on a disbursement research front, at the end of last week in Baton Rouge, University of New Hampshire, NOAA, EPA and Coast Guard convened a meeting to study disbursement news and ecosystem impacts of dispersed oil in the Gulf. With over 50 experts and practitioners from government, academia and industry, a two-day meeting to look at the potential long term impacts of prolonged use of large volumes of disbursements in the deepwater horizon oil spill response efforts.

And tomorrow, June 3, the consortium for ocean leadership is coordinating with the federal family, with NOAA in the lead, to host the science symposium in Baton Rouge to discuss urgent scientific issues that are as yet unresolved: Where is the oil going; what impact is oil and dispersed oil having; what are the short term, medium term and long term likely impacts of those?

So I think in summary, the efforts that are underway throughout the federal government are exemplified by what we have been doing at NOAA. Our efforts have been aggressive, strategic and sustained throughout. I would note that within hours after the BP—the explosion of the deepwater horizon and the sinking—the oil rooms of NOAA, which is located in Seattle were set up after being informed by the Coast Guard of the event, and within two hours and 17 minutes had issued the first oil spill trajectory to help inform the federal response.

So within NOAA we have satellites in space, we have planes in the air, we have ships and buoys on the water, scientists on the ground and information online all with the intent of bringing the best of the science to bear on this issue and moving ahead in a very aggressive fashion. Thank you.

ADM. ALLEN: Thank you, Jane and thanks for being a great partner. Since this administration brought its new team on board, I've been working very closely with Dr. Lubchenco since early last year and it's been a very fruitful partnership. We'd be glad to take any questions you have.

Q: (Inaudible) you had talked about (only) question (about) there about how much oil there is (inaudible) where is it going. It's been over 40 days, why don't you have it handled?

ADMINISTRATOR LUBCHENCO: I can certainly appreciate the urgency and the desire on everybody's part to have answers. The reality is that we want the right answers. We want information that we can trust and many of these research cruises that are underway are finding interesting features but to see a signal of something detected by instruments onboard a ship gives you a sense that something is there, but it doesn't tell you what, and it's really important to be able to collect samples of the water, hence the attention to being able to take discrete samples at different depths in the water column to take those back to shore at the end of the cruise and then have them analyzed in a laboratory setting.

So it's only relatively recently that those ships have been underway doing this master sampling. We're beginning to get results in and we are, I think, getting very close to be able to talk about not just what each individual cruise might be seeing out there on the water, but what the integrated pattern is, and that's in fact what we would like to know.

Q: Well, that's the question, why does it seem to take so long to mobilize (inaudible) get these ships out there and (inaudible).

ADMINISTRATOR LUBCHENCO: I think it's important to recognize what goes into having a research cruise. You have to have vessel that's ready to go. Not all of our vessels were—you know they were out doing other missions. You have to have the right equipment on board to do what's needed.

Many of these vessels are normally engaged in other kinds of activity. So you need to identify the equipment that you need. You need to stage it, you need to make sure that you have the proper amount of tables to deploy the instruments at the depths that you're interested in, and you need to have the scientific experts onboard. And that does take time to assemble and then to deploy the cruise to go out and begin working.

So I would suggest that the effort in fact has been very aggressive and that we will be getting good answers in the not too distant future, but I can understand everyone's interest in knowing what's happening.

Q: (Inaudible) talked about the possibility that (inaudible) have you see that before?

ADM. ALLEN: Well, they haven't got the second cut done, so we won't know completely until that cut is done and we remove the riser pipe from the top lower marine riser package. We are at the point of the leakage where the crimp in the line is that you've seen, or the kink—are applying subsea disbursements to minimize the oil that's coming to the surface while we do the cutting.

Yes, sir?

Q: Admiral Allen, Peter King with CBS News Radio. You had a meeting that may have been sometimes contentious yesterday with local officials who where lobbying hard and fast to get some movement on these sand berms and barrier islands. You've given them, I understand, a time of—I guess—four o'clock this afternoon, where you will have an answer on your recommendation from the White House. I'm just wondering what have you learned in the last 24 hours or 48 hours, if you will, that you didn't know already? And what do you think (inaudible) to reach the decision?

ADM.ALLEN: That's a great question. First of all, the meeting we held in New Orleans yesterday which included members of academia, federal trustees, fish and wildlife service and NOAA and so forth was convened to answer a couple of specific questions the president had for me following the meeting at Grand Isle last Friday—both the governor and parish presidents and some of the local mayors. And specifically, he wanted to understand what is the feasibility of constructing the proposed barriers and berms and number two, are they effective as far as this oil spill response, and most of the discussion yesterday focused on the fact that the barrier islands and berms have the potential to protect a far greater area of marshland behind them. So there's a multiplier effect for each mile of berm or barrier that you would construct.

On the other hand, as Dr. Lubchenco has noted a couple of times in other forums, we need to make sure that in constructing those barriers and berms that we're not doing harm to the environment by changing the water—the direction of the tidal and the ocean currents and other environmental impacts.

All of that was brought forward. Everybody made recommendations to find their positions. I briefed cabinet officials this morning and we're looking to try to get a decision later on today. So so far we're on a timeline. We just not have made the decision yet.

Q: Admiral, (inaudible) Associated Press. One of the (inaudible) question was the cruise last week or two …

ADM. ALLEN: Right.

Q: … (inaudible) found that yet?

ADM. ALLEN: Rather than waiting for a review of all the six segments, what we authorized was the state to go ahead with one of the segments as a prototype to start being able to move equipment, and then that becomes an issue between the state of Louisiana and British Petroleum and how best to get that rolling and mobilize the property dredge and resources you would need to do that.

The discussion yesterday was the viability of all six segments that were approved by the Core of Engineers permit as it relates to their feasibility and their efficacy-related oil spill response, and that is the briefing that I gave this morning and we're waiting for the results of that now.

Q: But the government yesterday was (inaudible) again, BP has not made any move that he could see to start that first project and (inaudible).

ADM. ALLEN: Well, it is between the state and BP and (inaudible) associated with that. We'll get in and try and facilitate that. But at this point, BP is the funding source and the state is the executing source and we'll follow up on that.

Q: Okay. Thank you.

Q: (Inaudible).

ADM. ALLEN: I'm not aware of that. We'll certainly look into it and I'll—we'll put out a statement on it or I'll address it at tomorrow's press conference. I'm not aware of that.

Q: (Inaudible) to the other standards either they're sending (inaudible) if the Corps has approved it, why isn't it getting (inaudible).

ADM. ALLEN: The Corps permits approved the feasibility and the environmental impact of the barriers and the berms. What they don't establish is whether they are effective in combating the oil spill. Most of these projects are looked at in terms of "what is the source of the sand?", "how will it be done?", "what are the design characteristics of the berms in the barrier islands and what are the environmental issues associated with that?" If all of that is consistent with the fact there is no harm to the environment, then the Corps of Engineers proffers a permit back to the state which they can accept.

The question of doing this as part of an oil spill response is novel and has never been done before. So we are vetting the issues associated with the proposal in terms of the effectiveness they would have in combating the oil spill. Because if that is the case, we can direct that to be done by British Petroleum and that's a novelty issue.

Q: Another question. Sorry, locally (inaudible) some sort of sum (inaudible) where local people only (inaudible) to only lay out not collect it, why do (inaudible), they're not the only (inaudible), why isn't is (inaudible).

ADM. ALLEN: I'm going to have to check with our local staging areas. It's usually dependant on what was the source, what was the staging area, are there local contracts, is there a lack of contracts, have we hired local people? And it's not—it kind of has developed in neighborhoods differently dependant on the availability of the workforce and the equipment to be deployed, but we'll certainly look into it.

Q: Now can you explain in detail about the (inaudible) and what kind of delay you expect?

ADM. ALLEN: Well, I'm going to do this in layman's terms. It's a very technical operation going on, 5,000 feet below the surface. Basically the diamond wire saw is a very, very sharp saw intended to try and get a clean cut right at the top of the lower marine riser package, and the cleaner that cut is—there are three or four different types of devices they can put over it. The cleaner the cut, the tighter the seal we can make on it.

Partially through that cut, the saw got stuck—not unlike if you were sawing through a piece of wood and every once in a while it binds up. The question is can we move the riser pipe to free it up and continue or might they have to bring another saw down and that—they're looking at that right now, it's as we speak.

Q: (Inaudible) time for questions.

ADM. ALLEN: Do you need …

LT. CMDR. RUSSELL:

Operator, we'll take questions from the phones now.

ADM. ALLEN: Phone questions up now?

Q: Operator, are you there?

OPERATOR: If you would like to ask a question via audio, press star, then the number one. Your first question comes from the line of Anne Thompson with NBC News.

Q: Hi, Admiral Allen, what happens if you can't make that second cut? Then what are your options? What if it doesn't work?

ADM. ALLEN: I don't think the issue is whether or not we can make the second cut—it's how fine we can make the second cut and how smooth we can make it. Now there are devices that can several that pipe, because we've already done it once with the shear cut we did yesterday. What we're trying to do is use the device that makes it as smooth as possible, because there's a direct relationship on how smooth that cut is and the device we can put over it in terms of how much oil it captures. We'd like to optimize that and be able to put what we call a top cap on it. If we don't get as clean a cut as we want, then we'll put something called a top hat over it which is a little wider fitting, but you have an increased chance that some oil will come out around the sides. So it's not—it's a matter whether it can be executed or not, it can be—it's a question of how much precision we can bring to it.

Next question?

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from Zunaira Zaki with ABC News.

Q: (Inaudible) the failure of (inaudible).

ADM. ALLEN: I'm sorry we have a bad connection. I'm not sure I understood the question. Can you try again, please?

Q: Sorry about that. I'm just – can you hear me now?

ADM. ALLEN: Go ahead.

Q: I'm just trying to figure out how soon we will know whether the top cap procedure has failed and we are going to be moving to the top hat part of the process?

ADM. ALLEN: We will know that as soon as we finish the cut of the riser pipe above the lower marine riser package. And as we said right now, there's a pause while they are dealing with the diamond wire saw that has become stuck partially through the pipe and we'll probably know that later on today or this afternoon.

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from Susan Daker with Dow Jones.

Q: Hi, this is Susan with Dow Jones. Has oil reached Florida – the panhandle in Florida?

ADM. ALLEN: We have not had reports on oil in the panhandle in Florida. We do have reports of some tar balls on Dolphin Island and some sheening south of Dolphin Island and we do have reports of some product in the western (inaudible) Mississippi, but that is the extent of the reporting in the last 24 hours.

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from (Zack Warmbraught) with Argus Media.

Q: Hi, thanks. Now that you've made the sheer cut, does that mean that the flow of oil has increased and if so, how much?

ADM. ALLEN: We don't anticipate the flow of oil to increase until the second cut is done. Our flow rate technical group headed by Marsha McNutt has estimated the potential for a 20 percent increase once that cut is made. It has not been made yet. In the meantime, the leak at the kink in the riser pipe is being treated with subsea dispersants.

Next question?

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from Peter Barnes with Fox Business.

Q: Hey, thanks for doing this, Admiral. As you know, Eric Holder, the Attorney General, was down yesterday and had his team of local U.S. attorneys with him and also talked to the state AGs. I'm just wondering, as part of your work there, are you at all involved in helping these attorneys gather evidence that they might need later on for civil or criminal cases?

ADM. ALLEN: Our focus is on the response and dealing with the oil on the water and the oil as a source on the subsea. There's an independent Marine Board of Investigation that has been convened under the joint offices of the Department of the Interior and the Department of Homeland Security that's been empanelled in New Orleans. They've had several weeks of testimony. The facts generated from that Marine Board of Investigation will likely provide some basis for a decision on further actions, but that is separate from the response.

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from Brett Clanton with Houston Chronicle.

Q: Good morning, Admiral Allen and thanks for the call. Just two real quick questions. You mentioned the possibility of having to bring in a second saw to make the cut if you're unable to free that from the riser pipe. Is there a second saw on location or would that – would there be delays in deploying a second one? And then a second follow-up question, if you are successful in making the cut today, did you say that you would install the cap today? You all would expect to install the cap today?

ADM. ALLEN: As soon as the cut is made that separates the remainder of the riser pipe from the lower marine riser package—they will assess the quality of the cut and either move to install the top cap, which is the tighter device with actually a rubber seal around it, or the top hat which is a little wider and has less of a seal. One of those two would be deployed, depending on the inspection of the cut once it's done.

And regarding the earlier question, [Department of Interior] Secretary Ken Salazar and Secretary Chu are down in Houston reporting back up. They're there personally. I think what they were going to attempt to do is extract the saw and bring it to the surface. If they couldn't do that, then they were looking at the second saw. I don't have the exact details on the location of that, but we will make an announcement later today about it.

And one more question, please?

OPERATOR: Your next question comes from Marc Kaufman with Washington Post.

Q: Yes, there have been some reports last week of marine mammals, dolphins in particular that have washed up on shore and there was going to be some testing to see whether or not the oil is what killed them. Has there been any conclusion about that and are there marine mammals that have been found (inaudible) to have been killed by the oil?

ADM. ALLEN: Sir, could you get a little closer to the phone and restate the question, please?

Q: OK, I'm very sorry. Can you hear me now?

ADM. ALLEN: Yes, go ahead.

Q: The question had to do with marine mammals and dolphins in particular. There were a number that – or at least one that washed up ashore last week and there was – they were going to be taken in for testing and so the question is whether or not any of them have proven to be killed by the oil?

ADM. ALLEN: Dr. Lubchenco?

ADMINISTRATOR LUBCHENCO: Yes, this is Jane Lubchenco. I'm—I don't know offhand what the latest number of dolphins is, but I can get that for you and we will make that public. We are indeed collecting all of the dolphins that have been stranded. They will be sent for necropsies. The initial indications for the dolphin results that I have seen suggest that there were no evidence of oil internally, but the tissue samples and necropsies had not been completed and so we need to wait for those results to come in to say definitively if oil might be a factor in contributing to those deaths. Thank you very much, folks.

ADM. ALLEN: Thank you.

Q: (Inaudible). You said that you would get back with me about my …

ADM. ALLEN: Any of the follow-up items we said, please see Tony Russell right here.

LT. CMDR. RUSSELL: Thank you, folks.

OPERATOR: Ladies and gentlemen, this does conclude today's conference call. You may now disconnect.

For information about the response effort, visit www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com.
