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Logs Show Coast Guard Saw Potential Threat Early

By JOHN SOLOMON and CAMPBELL ROBERTSON

Coast Guard officials grasped the potential threat of a catastrophic spill in the first days after the explosion on board the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig, estimating that 64,000 to 110,000 barrels a day of crude oil could possibly gush out of the well in the event of a complete blowout, according to Coast Guard logs.

The logs provide the most detailed account of the chaotic early days of the BP disaster.

Within 24 hours of the explosion on the rig, an entry in the logs raises a concern that the oil could pour out at the rate of 8,000 barrels a day in the event of a blowout.

That estimate was raised to a potential leak of at least 64,000 barrels on April 23, showing that first responders began to understand the environmental threat to the Gulf of Mexico when Coast Guard officials detected the first signs of oil appearing on the gulf waters.

The official White House timeline first mentions a leak on April 24, four days after the explosion, when undersea robots discovered a plume of oil coming from the riser on the sea floor.

Yet oil had been gushing out of the riser from the explosion through the moment the rig sank, and repeated attempts to stop the flow with the blowout preventer had failed.

A White House spokesman said the timeline includes language noting that it is not intended to be a detailed or exhaustive version of events.

The White House has repeatedly rejected criticisms from both sides of the political aisle that it did not act quickly or decisively enough in the early days of the BP disaster.

Nicholas Shapiro, a White House spokesman, said that in an April 22 meeting Adm. Thad W.

Allen of the Coast Guard told the president that as soon as he saw the Deepwater Horizon oil rig on fire, he knew oil was likely to start gushing into the Gulf of Mexico.

At that same meeting, Mr. Shapiro said, Secretary of the Interior [Ken Salazar](#) told Mr. Obama this event could eclipse the amount of oil spilled during the [Exxon Valdez](#) accident in 1989. The president that day issued a public statement urging the federal government to make the accident its No. 1 priority.

The Coast Guard logs were provided to the Center for Public Integrity, a nonprofit investigative journalism organization, by Representative [Darrell Issa](#) of California, the senior Republican on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee. The center shared them with The New York Times.

The logs detail the failed attempts to repair the blowout preventer on the sea floor, which was spewing oil that also fueled the fire on the rig.

They also show that, as an extensive and wide-ranging search and rescue mission unfolded, the size of the oil slick was growing daily on the gulf's surface, though Coast Guard officials believed that the oil was mainly being burned off in the fire.

Coast Guard officials have repeatedly stated that they were preparing for a worst-case situation, and initially ordered a variety of oil response vessels to the scene, including a team that is assigned to respond to oil spills.

On the morning of April 22, members of the unified command held a phone conference to discuss the potential spill if the rig sank, which it did less than two hours later.

Around midday, aircraft flying over the spill reported a sheen of sixteen square miles, but added that "it wasn't as bad as they imagined," the logs show.

At a news conference that afternoon, Rear Adm. Mary E. Landry of the Coast Guard said that the oil on the surface appeared to be residual from the fire, though she raised the possibility that the gallons of diesel fuel on board might have begun leaking after the rig sank.

By the early morning of April 23, the Coast Guard had already flown five sorties and applied 1,500 gallons of dispersant to locations where sheens were reported, according to the logs, though officials that same day said the well appeared not to be leaking.

Conflicting reports seemed to complicate what appeared to be a simple chain of events: the rig continued to gush up until the moment it sank, making a leak seemingly inevitable.

That same morning of April 23, an undersea robotic vehicle reported that the valve on the blowout preventer had closed, sealing off the well, though that report was found to be false several hours later, the logs show.

As the search for the missing 11 workers came to a close, Admiral Landry, possibly misled by the erroneous early report, said that it appeared that the blowout preventer had worked.

“It is not a guarantee,” she said at a news conference, “but right now we continue to see no oil emanating from the well.”

That oil was not leaking at the wellhead is corroborated by the logs, though at the time a survey of the entire riser, which was still attached to the blowout preventer, had not been completed.

Coast Guard officials did caution that there was still uncertainty surrounding the status of the blowout preventer, but continued to view the oil and water mix on the surface as residual from the days the rig was on fire.

Despite that report, BP began to establish an incident command post on April 23 “to prepare for potential release,” estimating a potential release of 64,000 to 110,000 barrels a day “if the well were to completely blow out.”

On the morning of Saturday, April 24, the logs report that an undersea robot had noticed “a small quantity of unknown material” emanating from the drill pipe, which is encased in the riser.

After the leak was surveyed, it was determined that 1,000 barrels a day were pouring from the riser.

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