BP Deepwater Horizon update: operation static kill

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By Mary Ellen Ternes

As of this writing, the April 20, 2010, BP Deepwater Horizon explosion and subsequent oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico appears to be contained and the well sealed. After several failed attempts to cap the 5,000-foot deep well, BP installed a containment cap on July 14, halting the flow of oil from the Deepwater Horizon well for the first time since April 20, 2010. On August 4, BP began operation "static kill" to seal off the well, pumping several thousand barrels of mud through the containment cap into the well. BP officials have stated that BP intends to complete the relief well as the solution for permanently closing the well.

From April 20 through August 4, the BP well released an estimated 4.9 million barrels of oil. On August 4, the National Incident Command (NIC) released an interagency report, "BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Budget: What Happened To the Oil?" providing its estimate of the oil that has been released from the well and the fate of that oil. The report provides the following estimates: burning, skimming and direct recovery from the wellhead removed one quarter of the oil released from the wellhead; one quarter of the total oil naturally evaporated or dissolved, and just less than one quarter (24%) was dispersed (either naturally or as a result of operations) as microscopic droplets into Gulf waters; the residual amount — just over one quarter (26%) — on or just below the surface as light sheen and weathered tar balls, has washed ashore or been collected from the shore, or is buried in sand and sediments. Oil in the residual and dispersed categories is in the process of being degraded. This means that if the NIC's report is correct, an estimated 1.27 million barrels of oil remain in the environment. However, as of August 24, 2010, Dr. Hazen of Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory has reported that a previously reported 22-mile plume of dispersed oil droplets has vanished due to degradation by an as yet unidentified bacteria present in recent samples. Impacts to the environment, water quality and ecosystems, and potentially surprising results from deep-sea application of dispersants at the source of a leak, will continue to be studied for the foreseeable future.

This event has been, and will continue to be, the driver for responsive policy shifts, including restructuring of regulatory programs governing oil and natural gas drilling. Just before their August recess, Congressional leaders introduced proposed legislation intended to rewrite oil and natural gas production policy in response to the BP spill. The proposals address safety and environmental standards for drilling in federal waters, provide Congress with direct oversight of offshore energy production, require responsible parties to pay all damages arising from their spill by removing the current $75 million liability cap, and legislate the termination of the Minerals Management Service. The Senate version would raise the federal oil-spill trust fee from 8 cents a barrel to 45 cents a barrel, covering the costs of the spill (est. $15 billion), and also provide rebates for compressed natural gas motor vehicles and residential energy efficiency. These proposals add to challenges created by President Obama's suspension of deepwater drilling and Democrat's proposals to rescind tax breaks for fossil fuel producers.

- See the NIC's report regarding the fate of the BP oil

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