Spill Tops Valdez Disaster

BP Pauses, Then Resumes Pumping ‘Mud’ Into Broken Well; Regulator Resigns

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As authorities waited Thursday to see whether BP PLC’s “top kill” operation would stop the oil gushing from the company’s broken well in the Gulf of Mexico, a federal panel of scientists released estimates of the spill’s size that would rank it the worst in U.S. history, surpassing the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster.

BP said late Thursday it temporarily halted, then resumed, the pumping of heavy drilling fluid, or “mud,” into the well. The pause was partly to assess the results of the first phase of the operation, the company said, and to restock the vessels ferrying mud to the disaster site.

 Fallout from last month’s explosion on the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig reverberated in the U.S. capital Thursday, as members of Congress accused BP of deliberately downplaying the size of the leak and President Barack Obama slammed the brakes on off-shore deepwater oil drilling, in a policy pivot from just two months ago.

Mr. Obama also accepted the resignation of his top oil regulator, and accepted blame for failures before and after the sinking of the Deepwater Horizon.

“T take responsibility,” Mr. Please turn to page A6
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Obama said at an hour-long news conference. "It is my job to make sure everything is done to shut this down."

Oil has been spewing from the damaged well since the rig sank on April 22. Eleven workers died in the initial explosions that doomed the rig. Crude has washed up on 100 miles of Louisiana shoreline, threatening the livelihood of thousands of fishermen and shrimpers.

Between 12,000 and 19,000 barrels per day are estimated to be spilling into the Gulf, said U.S. Geological Survey director Marcia McNutt, the leader of an inter-agency team created to measure the spill following criticism that a previous estimate of 5,000 barrels a day was inaccurate.

The White House said it had canceled the sale of oil-exploration leases in the western Gulf and off the Atlantic Coast of Virginia, and had delayed a major Arctic drilling project until at least 2011. The administration said it would place a moratorium on issuing any new permits to drill wells in deep water for six months, until an independent commission delivers its report on the disaster.

Less than three weeks before the explosion, Mr. Obama had called for the expansion of offshore drilling in the Gulf, and said he would consider allowing it on parts of the Atlantic coast.

He said Thursday the U.S. would remain dependent on oil for the foreseeable future, and that much of it should be domestically produced. But he conceded he had accepted too readily the industry's assurances about drilling safety. "Where I was wrong was in my belief that the oil companies had their act together when it came to worst-case scenarios," he said. "I don't have that confidence right now."

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said the announced moratorium would apply to any rig drilling in more than 500 feet of water. Deepwater drilling is often identified as an operation in at least 1,000 feet of water.

The federal government will require more rigorous certifications of blow-out preventers, the massive emergency units that failed on the Deepwater Horizon, tougher inspections for deepwater drilling rigs and expanded safety training for workers.

"We are pausing deepwater drilling and examining our systems to ensure this type of disaster does not happen again," Mr. Salazar said.

He also announced the resignation of S. Elizabeth Birnbaum as director of the Minerals Management Service, the regulatory agency described by Mr. Obama as "scandalously close" to the oil industry it is supposed to police.

Mr. Obama's about-face on offshore drilling is likely to have political consequences. Lawmakers in oil states from both parties decried the shift, saying it would cost jobs and was overly broad. The shelving of Shell Oil's major investments in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas off Alaska's coast touched off cheers from environmentalists and objections from the state's Republican and Democratic senators.

"All of us are committed to protecting Alaska's waters," Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R., Alaska) said. "I'm also committed to protecting Alaska's economy."

In a gesture to one of his most vocal critics, Mr. Obama said Thursday he approved construction of part of a system of massive, offshore berms in Louisiana. Republican Gov. Bobby Jindal lashed out this week at the administration's reluctance to approve the berms, which are intended to protect marshes.

Efforts at halting the oil by pumping heavy drilling fluid into the well—known as the "top kill" procedure—had showed early signs of success. But Doug Suttles, BP's chief operating officer, said Thursday afternoon, "the operation has not yet achieved its objective." He said BP was hoping to stuff material into the top of the well to block leaks, and expected the procedure to last another 24 hours or more.

The top kill was widely viewed as the company's best hope for plugging the leak before new relief wells, currently being drilled, can be used to shut down the leak permanently—a process that will likely take months. The top kill procedure has been used for decades, but never a mile underwater.

"If this had been onshore or in inland waters, shallow waters, this would have been a two-week deal at the outside," said Bill Abel, a veteran well control expert in Houston.

Success with top kill would surely bring some measure of relief to both BP's chief executive, Tony Hayward, and to Mr. Obama, both of whom have come under withering criticism.

Mr. Obama tried to make the issue personal, saying his elder daughter, Malia, had interrupted his shaving one morning to ask if he had plugged the hole yet.

"This is what I wake up to in the morning, and what I go to sleep thinking about," he said.

—Ben Casselman and Angel Gonzalez contributed to this article.