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Cap Slows Gulf Oil Leak as Engineers Move Cautiously

By CLIFFORD KRAUSS and MICHAEL COOPER

HOUSTON — Oil continued to pour from a runaway oil well in the Gulf of Mexico on Saturday as engineers worked to close two of four vents on a capping device lowered onto the gushing riser pipe.

“The vents remain open,” Adm. Thad W. Allen of the Coast Guard, who is in charge of the federal response to the oil spill, said at a briefing on Saturday morning.

Admiral Allen said that while engineers were able to bring 6,000 barrels of oil to the surface in a 24-hour period, they were hesitant to close the vents out of fear that if they did so too quickly, water would rush in and form the kind of icy hydrates that doomed a previous attempt to cap the leak.

A technician working on the operation said the engineers were also working slowly and deliberately because of a concern that the volume and velocity of the escaping oil could create so much friction on the inside walls of the new 5,000-foot pipe that it could force it entirely off the cap.

“It’s a complicated deal,” said the technician, who spoke on the condition that he remain anonymous because he was not authorized to speak publicly. He said the engineers began working on closing the vents on Saturday morning. The speed at which they would close all four vents “depends on how everything reacts,” the technician said.

It was not immediately clear how significant a gain the initial capture of the roughly 6,000 barrels — the precise number was 6,077 — represented.

Since the Deepwater Horizon explosion on April 20, official estimates have put the flow rate at 12,000 barrels to 19,000 barrels a day, although some scientists have said it could be substantially more. Government officials also said the volume might have increased by as much as 20 percent when engineers cut the damaged riser, which they did before lowering the containment dome.

Now, technicians involved in the operation say they are concerned that as they succeed in gathering more and more oil, they may have trouble handling and storing all of it. A ship on the surface is capable of collecting 15,000 barrels a day, Admiral Allen said.

The admiral had initially said that engineers hoped to begin closing the vents on Friday. But on Saturday he said they had not because of fears that the pressure inside the cap would become so great that oil would blast through the imperfect seal.

With the oil staining beaches and killing wildlife across the gulf, and tar balls beginning to surface on the shores of the Florida Panhandle, [President Obama](#) said in his weekly Saturday radio address, “We are prepared for the worst, even as we hope that BP’s efforts bring better news than we’ve received before.”

BP and government officials had said it would take at least until Sunday to fully deploy the containment device and make a definitive assessment of the amount of oil it can collect. BP executives have said that as much as 90 percent of the escaping oil may be contained by the cap if all goes well.

The cap is a temporary measure. The well cannot be cemented shut until two relief wells are drilled, by August at the earliest.

Technicians, employing submarine robots, worked through the night to begin closing the vents. So far the cap has been able to bear the pressure and there is no sign of hydrates forming. That is viewed by experts as a positive sign because hydrates clogged a similar containment device a month ago and prevented it from capturing the oil effectively.

In his speech, Mr. Obama said the federal government had “mobilized on every front” to contain and clean up

the oil spill, and called attention to the plight of some of the shrimpers and oystermen he met while visiting the Louisiana coast on Friday.

“These folks work hard,” the president said in the address, which he recorded Friday evening during a visit to Grand Isle, La. “They meet their responsibilities. But now because of a man-made catastrophe — one that’s not their fault and that’s beyond their control — their lives have been thrown into turmoil. It’s brutally unfair. It’s wrong.”

Mr. Obama promised that he would “stand with the people of the Gulf Coast until they are made whole.”

He reeled off a ream of statistics to show the scale of the response so far. He said that more than 20,000 people were at work protecting the coastlines, and that he had authorized the deployment of 17,500 National Guard troops to help in the response. He said that 1,900 boats were in the gulf working on the cleanup, and that more than 4.3 million feet of boom had been deployed to try to keep oil from reaching the coastline.

BP is already preparing to install over the next several weeks a couple of backup systems in the containment effort. The company has several more caps on hand with different engineering designs in case the device it is trying now fails.

By the end of the month, it planned to replace the newly installed capping device with one called an “overshot tool,” which is heavier and more tightly sealed. The tool would not only direct the escaping oil from the runaway well to a containment ship, but also be outfitted with a containment drum, so that oil collection would not be completely interrupted if a hurricane forced the ship to leave the area.

The company is also building a free-standing riser pipe that would siphon oil through the manifold that was built during the failed operation known as a top kill. The pipe would be connected to the surface ship with tubing that could be detached and reconnected rapidly in the event of a hurricane.

“That will reduce the time to hook up and disconnect from probably 10 days with the current system to perhaps 48 hours,” [Tony Hayward](#), BP’s chief executive, said Friday.

Clifford Krauss reported from Houston, and Michael Cooper from New Orleans.

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