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Experts: Oil spill could affect Treasure Coast

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Originally published 06:41 a.m., April 28, 2010

Updated 05:58 a.m., April 29, 2010

The U.S. Coast Guard on Wednesday attempted to burn off portions of a growing Gulf of Mexico oil slick that currents could bring to Florida's Treasure Coast in coming weeks, officials said.

An oil rig 50 miles off Louisiana exploded and sank April 20, leading to an uncontrolled oil leak. About 42,000 gallons of crude oil are flowing daily into the Gulf of Mexico, leading to an irregular oil plume that on Wednesday was 600 miles in size about 23 miles off Louisiana's coast.

Potentially, it could become one of the worst oil spills in the nation's history, federal officials said. The most immediate concern is the Mississippi River Delta. But Gulf currents also could steer traces of the oil southward around Florida's peninsula and eventually into the waters off the state's east coast.

That could threaten wildlife and ocean quality, officials said.

"All depends on how quickly and how good a job they do of cleaning the oil up," said George Maul, who heads the department of marine and environmental systems at the Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne. "And despite the cleanup effort, we have to remember that the oil sinks. So it is not only on the surface."

CLEANUP EFFORTS

Authorities are planning to use a rarely employed solution: Burning it.

It's anticipated to be a hellish scene: Giant sheets of flame racing across the Gulf of Mexico as thick, black smoke billows high into the sky. This, though, is no Hollywood action movie.

The real-life plan, to be deployed just 20 miles from the Gulf Coast, is a last-ditch effort to burn up the oil spill before it can wash ashore and wreak environmental havoc.

The Coast Guard late Wednesday afternoon started a test burn of an area about 30 miles east of the delta of the Mississippi River to see how the technique was working.

Crews planned to use hand-held flares to set fire to sections of the massive spill. Crews turned to the plan after failing to stop the leak at the spot where the deepwater oil platform exploded and sank.

A 500-foot boom was to be used to corral several thousand gallons of the thickest oil on the surface, which will then be towed to a more remote area, set on fire, and allowed to burn for about an hour.

If the hour-long test burn was successful, rig operator BP PLC was expected to continue the oil fires as long as the weather cooperated. The burns were not expected to be done at night.

Greg Pollock, head of the oil spill division of the Texas General Land Office, which is providing equipment for crews in the Gulf, said he is not aware of a similar burn ever being done off the U.S. coast. The last time crews with his agency used fire booms to burn oil was a 1995 spill on the San Jacinto River.

“When you can get oil ignited, it is an absolutely effective way of getting rid of a huge percentage of the oil,” he said. “I can’t overstate how important it is to get the oil off the surface of the water.”

The oil has the consistency of thick roofing tar.

When the flames go out, Pollock said, the material that is left resembles a hardened ball of tar that can be removed from the water with nets or skimmers.

In other efforts, about 70 vessels are attempting to help contain the spill and 64,000 gallons of oil dispersant have been put out, along with 76,000 feet of oil containment barriers, according to the Coast Guard.

So far, the Coast Guard station in Fort Pierce hasn’t been called into the effort.

Normally, the only oil on Treasure Coast beaches comes from ships in the ocean. Small, black globs of tar occasionally wash up and blacken the feet of people walking in the sands.

At the moment, “the weather’s in our favor” in keeping the oil spill offshore, said Coast Guard Petty Officer Erik Swanson, who explained that the wind was blowing the oil away from shore. However, winds on Wednesday afternoon are forecast to blow eastward, possibly moving the oil closer to Florida's Panhandle and west coast beaches.

Gov. Charlie Crist took a helicopter ride Tuesday to survey the spill, which was 90 miles from the beaches of Pensacola, and afterward stated that now is not the right time for Florida to begin oil drilling.

State officials are growing increasingly concerned about the environmental and economic impact of the accident on Florida.

The Coast Guard said the oil spill was growing. The borders of the spill are uneven, making it difficult to calculate how many square miles are covered, Swanson said.

So far, skimming vessels had collected more than 48,000 gallons of oily water, Swanson said.

“Our goal is to fight this thing as far offshore as possible,” he said. The rig was owned by Transocean Ltd. and operated by BP PLC. After a deadly Texas refinery accident and an oil spill in Alaska in recent years, BP has made improving safety and operational methods a priority.

The company was fined a record \$87 million by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration for failing to correct safety hazards after a 2005 explosion at a refinery in Texas City.

At the site of the current accident, crews used robot submarines to activate valves in hopes of stopping the leaks. BP also mobilized two rigs to drill a relief well if needed. Such a well could help redirect the oil, though it could also take weeks to complete.

BP plans to collect leaking oil on the ocean bottom by lowering a large dome to capture the oil and then pump it through pipes and hoses into a surface vessel, said Doug Suttles, chief operating officer of BP Exploration and Production.

It could take up to a month to get the equipment in place.

“That system has been deployed in shallower water, but it has never been deployed at 5,000 feet of water, so we have to be careful,” he said.

IMPACT ON WILDLIFE

One problem with the current spill is the leak involves crude oil.

“This is heavy black oil that includes tar and asphalt,” said Jim Egan, executive director of the Marine Resource Council in Palm Bay. “This black tarry stuff can linger forever. It can coat the wildlife and it can coat the beaches.”

The impact on sea turtles is a significant concern.

“The females are getting ready to lay their eggs,” Egan said. “This might throw off their ability to reproduce.”

A slick of this magnitude can also lead to fish kills and impact dolphins, whales and manatees. Organisms at the bottom of the ocean are particularly at risk because the slick interferes with light penetration.

Then there is the danger of the oily scum washing up on beaches, bringing with it a foul odor that can linger.

If the slick gets caught in the loop current and makes its way to Florida's east coast, it could end up on the Treasure Coast or it could wash ashore at points south or north of the region.

"We should not wait till it actually affects us," said Mitchell Roffer of Roffer's Ocean Fishing Forecasting Service in West Melbourne, who is concerned about the impact on coral reefs.

PLANNING AHEAD

There is a plan in place, according to David Palandro, scientific support coordinator for oil spill response with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

"We are keeping up with everything," he said. "Plans involve mitigation, booming strategies and determining what resources should be prioritized."

Crist said the entire incident has him rethinking whether drilling off Florida's coast is a good idea.

Republicans in Florida have been pushing the idea of drilling within 10 miles of the coast.

Crist has said he's willing to listen as long as drilling is far enough out, clean enough and safe enough to protect the state's beaches. On Tuesday, however, he said something is wrong if the explosion doesn't give people pause.

The Associated Press and Scripps Treasure Coast Staff Writer Elliott Jones contributed to this report.



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