

7-14-2010

Mexico Takes Precautions to Protect Shores From Leaking British Petroleum Well

Carlos Navarro

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex>

Recommended Citation

Navarro, Carlos. "Mexico Takes Precautions to Protect Shores From Leaking British Petroleum Well." (2010).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/5417>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Mexico Takes Precautions to Protect Shores From Leaking British Petroleum Well

by Carlos Navarro

Category/Department: Environment and Sust

Published: Wednesday, July 14, 2010

When British Petroleum's Deep Water Horizon drilling rig started spilling oil into the waters of the Gulf of Mexico in late April, Mexico officials decided to take a wait-and-see approach. It is not that they were unconcerned about the possibility that oil from the well could reach Mexican shores and cause environmental damage, but they figured that the possibility was small and that BP would have the situation under control in the near term. Mexican officials began to worry after watching as BP's efforts to cap the leak failed repeatedly, especially with the approach of August's normal change in currents. By mid-July, when BP had not plugged the leak, the federal government was ready to move on contingency plans, including a demand that BP provide funds for Mexico to deal with potential damage from the spill on its ecosystems. The Veracruz government has also made preparations to take legal action against the British oil company.

President Felipe Calderón's administration had come under fire for its seemingly nonchalant attitude in the aftermath of the spill ([SourceMex, 2010-05-12.](#)) Even in early June, more than a month after the leak began, the administration's comments were cautious. "The probability that the oil stain will move toward Mexican shores is small," Juan José Suárez Coppel, director of the state-run oil company PEMEX, told a committee of members of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. "But if this were to occur, it would be in the form of tar paste, tar balls, or streaks of highly emulsified oil. This could happen during the next five to seven months."

Similar statements came from Alejandra Martínez García, a deputy director at the Comisión Federal para la Protección contra Riesgos Sanitarios (COFEPRIS). "We do not see a high probability that this spill is going to prompt us to issue an alert," Martínez García told the Mexico City daily newspaper *El Universal* in early June. "But if we were to face an emergency situation, we would act promptly."

BP's repeated failure to plug leak prompts concerns

The administration seemed to change its mind after BP failed in its repeated attempts to plug the oil leak in June and early July.

On June 15, the Secretaría del de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) said it was preparing a lawsuit against BP for potential damage from the spill to Mexico's ecosystem. Officials said the Mexican government is looking for a legal instrument to use that would measure the value of the biodiversity that would be lost in the event that the oil spill contaminates Mexican flora and fauna.

Through the lawsuit, Mexico would also seek funds from the company to ensure that Mexico has sufficient funds to take preventative actions and also to deal with any contingencies resulting from the spill.

Environment Secretary Juan Rafael Elvira Quesada said the administration had spent about US\$20 million through mid-June for monitoring and prevention activities. The funds requested from BP

would be used to create protections in case the oil reaches Mexican shores. "We have had some communication with BP, but we need to determine the full costs of our plan of action," said Elvira Quesada. "We are not willing to assume the costs on our own."

The environment secretary said SEMARNAT and other departments are conducting studies along the entire stretch of Mexico's coastal region on the Gulf of Mexico to determine how far out the spill would have to reach before it starts damaging coastal ecosystems.

Government worried about seasonal change in currents

A major reason for alarm in Mexico is that the leak has released much more oil into the waters of the Gulf of Mexico than first anticipated.

As of July 14, BP officials were conducting tests to determine whether a huge cap could safely seal the leaking oil well.

Regardless of any progress by BP, there is still a lot of oil out in the waters of the Gulf. This has prompted the Calderón administration to prepare for a worst-case scenario, taking extraordinary steps like acquiring barriers and other containment materials, storage tanks for recovered oil, and all-terrain vehicles to access any remote beaches that might be affected.

Additionally, the government has begun training thousands of coastal residents to provide assistance in case of an emergency.

With the seasonal change in the currents, there is concern that oil could easily reach Mexican shores during the second half of the year. Gerardo Gold, a scientist at the Centro de Investigación y Estudios Avanzados del Instituto Politécnico Nacional (IPN), said spilled crude could easily reach Mexico because of the inversion of the coastal current that normally occurs in August.

Under these conditions, said Elvira Quesada, the oil could reach Mexican shores by the end of the year.

Gold said another concern is the change in direction of the Loop Current in the fall, which could push the oil slick toward Mexican shores. The Loop Current, a circular stream of warm water, runs through the Gulf of Mexico in the spring and summer. The current flows northward between Cuba and the Yucatán Peninsula, moves north into the Gulf of Mexico, loops west and south before exiting to the east through the Florida Straits.

Romeo de Coss Gómez, director of the Mérida campus of the Centro de Investigación y de Estudios Avanzados (CINVESTAV), said the oil spill could move into Mexican waters at a fast rate and not in the methodical form in which it has dispersed thus far. Under this scenario, the current could make contact with the spilled oil, which would disperse it at a great speed, said de Coss.

Mexico is also concerned about predictions that this will be an active hurricane season in the Atlantic Ocean. Most of those hurricanes could make their way into the Gulf of Mexico, creating more uncertainties regarding the oil spill. "During a hurricane, it will be extremely difficult to project the direction that the sheet of oil will take," said the Office of the Presidency. "Additionally, the sheet could end up covering a larger surface, and it would be harder to control because the mass would be dispersed and fragmented."

SEMARNAT officials confirmed that some oil has already encroached into Mexican waters, although the contamination has not yet reached the currents. "We have to be prepared," said Luis Fueyo, SEMARNAT's deputy secretary for protected areas. "If there is no success in controlling the oil, it is probable that the slick will enter national waters [fully] in October."

Fueyo said the government is especially concerned about 15,000 families in southern Tamaulipas and northern Veracruz, whose principal economic activity is fishing for oysters and crabs. "The value is not that important, it is more the enormous social value that this activity represents," Fueyo told London's Financial Times.

The Veracruz government has also taken a proactive stance, reaching an agreement with an international law firm to take legal action against BP in case the spilled oil damages the shores of Veracruz.

Gov. Fidel Herrera said the action is equivalent to taking out an insurance policy to protect the ecosystems in Veracruz. "We would rather take the preventative action now than to have to react and regret later," said the governor.

Herrera said the state has been in conversation with officials in neighboring Tamaulipas about joining the potential lawsuit. The action required no up-front fees, and the international lawyers agreed to waive fees if no action is required.

Elvira said the BP accident has prompted SEMARNAT to conduct a full inventory of 145 PEMEX platforms in the Campeche Sound to determine if they are environmentally sound. "We have certified 60 of these platforms as environmentally safe," said Elvira. "They have taken steps beyond those required by law." The environment secretary said the remaining 85 platforms are still under review.

-- End --