

Ecosystems in peril

Long-term effects of oil on life in the Gulf is unknown

GRAND ISLE, La. — Signs are posted on the doors of local restaurants that the beaches are still open on Grand Isle, but there is no swimming allowed.

Walking over the dunes and onto the beach, three things are evident: The beautiful beach with waves still lapping at the shore, the offshore oil rigs lining the horizon and orange booms creating a barrier between the surf and sand.

Closer to the water, the shoreline is dotted with clumps of what at first appears to be wet sand, but upon closer inspection, is sand held together by oil. Tar balls like this line the surf up and down the entire stretch of beach, evidence of the magnitude of the BP oil spill.

These tar balls only represent a small fraction of the oil as most still lies offshore both on the surface and in subsurface plumes.

I spoke with one of the men contracted to do the cleanup work, a local fisherman who is now assisting BP with disaster relief. He's not allowed under his contract to speak with media, but he told me he could no longer stay silent after what he has seen happen to the water around where he grew up.



"Out there, the oil is thick," he said. "I've seen birds covered in oil. I'm not a bird guy, but when I see these birds covered in oil and not able to fly, I get a feeling in my gut and I even feel myself tear up. And I usually don't pay any attention to birds."

He said that just seven miles offshore the oil is about four-feet thick on top of the

water and he didn't know how any creature could survive.

After walking on the beach and seeing the tar balls, and speaking with the locals, I couldn't help but think about the prolific fishing grounds in this area of the Gulf, over 86,000 square km of which have been shut down because of the spill.

While the economic impact of the loss of fisheries is important, what is happening to the once-targeted species like shrimp and yellowfin tuna is equally important.

Can these species survive if they encounter the oil?

And what will be the long-term effects of the oil on this vibrant offshore community?

Eggs and larvae of spawning fish will definitely be affected, but the question remains if the adults will be able to dodge the oil and survive.

For now, most scientists agree that we don't know and only time will tell what the lasting effects will be.

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So far, so good...

KRISTEN HAYS
Reuters

BP is now a step closer to capping the leaking well deep under the Gulf of Mexico and trying to funnel oil to the surface after underwater robots successfully sheared off a gushing oil pipe Thursday.

"We have cleared the riser from the top of the wellhead, and the team is working to complete the cleanup operation before we put the cap on top of the well," BP Chief Executive Tony Hayward said on Thursday afternoon.

Hayward did not say when the well would be capped but said the operation's success could be gauged within 12-24 hours, adding that BP would work to stabilize the flow of oil and gas over the next two to three days once the well was capped.

Earlier on Thursday, U.S. Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen, the top U.S. official overseeing the operation, indicated at a news conference in Metairie, Louisiana, that BP would lower the cap onto what is left of the pipe, called a riser, on Thursday and "start to see if we can move gas and oil up the pipe."

BP did not respond to requests about the different timelines.

The white well cap with the number "4" displayed on the side could be seen hanging from a pipe in the depths on BP's live underwater camera feed on Thursday. Allen announced the pipe had been sheared from a lower marine riser package atop a failed blowout preventer. He called it "a significant step forward"

in BP's so-far unsuccessful attempts to plug or contain the six-week-old leak that has gushed up to 19,000 barrels of oil a day into the basin.

BP turned to huge shears to cut through the pipe as well as a smaller drillpipe inside to make way for a containment cap and seal.

Earlier efforts to use a diamond saw to shear off the pipe with a clean cut failed, possibly because the drillpipe inside the riser put up too much resistance, Allen said.

BP's next move is to lower the cap on the jagged remnants of the pipe in hopes that the seal will contain most of the leaking oil and gas, Allen said.

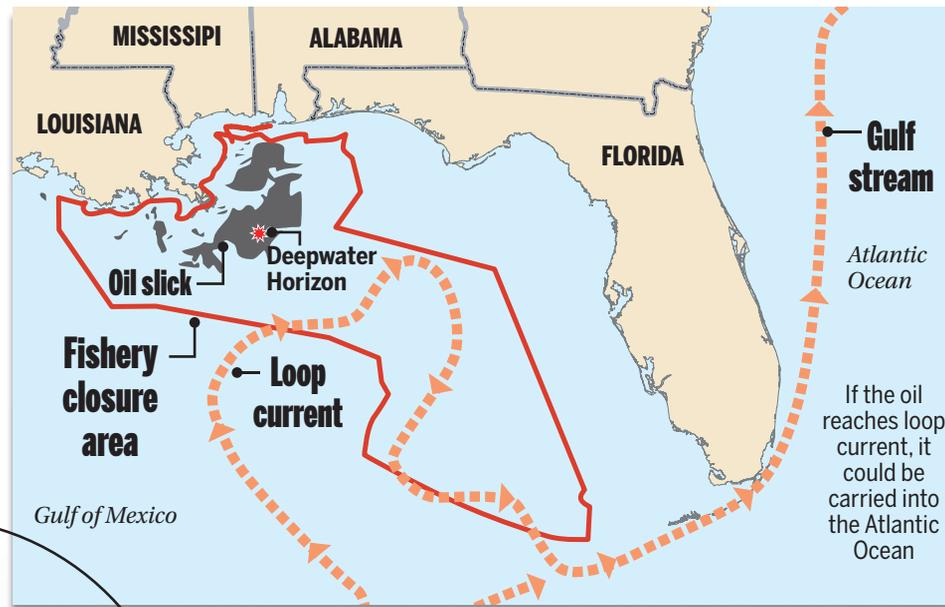
The cap will be placed over the leak to funnel oil and gas to a tanker vessel on the surface.

Because BP had to abandon efforts to slice through the pipe with the diamond-tipped saw, the ensuing cut is more jagged and irregular than initially planned, which means that BP will not be able to contain as much oil as it had earlier hoped.

The jagged pipe remnant also juts from the lower marine riser package, or LMRP, at a 10-degree angle, adding to the challenge, he said. "This is an irregular cut," Allen said. "It will be a little bit more challenging to get the seal around."

Oil is expected to flow from the ruptured well until BP completes a pair of relief wells, expected to be finished in August.

They are slightly ahead of schedule right now, but we are not willing to declare victory until one or both plug the leak, Allen said.



CLEANING OIL-SOAKED BIRDS

Bill and nostrils: Cleaned with cotton buds.
Eyes: Flushed with warm sterile saline solution
Body: Repeatedly washed with liquid dish soap
Charcoal: Used to make bird vomit ingested oil

