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White House Takes a Bigger Role in the Oil Spill Cleanup

By [CAMPBELL ROBERTSON](#)

NEW ORLEANS — The response to the [oil](#) spill in the Gulf of Mexico intensified abruptly on Thursday, with the federal government intervening more aggressively as the rapidly growing slick drifted ever closer to the fragile coastline of Louisiana.

Resources from the [United States Navy](#) were marshaled to supplement an operation that already consisted of more than 1,000 people and scores of vessels and aircraft.

Calling it “a spill of national significance” which could threaten coastline in several states, Homeland Security Secretary [Janet Napolitano](#) announced the creation of a second command post in Mobile, Ala., in addition to the one in Louisiana, to manage potential coastal impact in Alabama, Mississippi and Florida. Interior Secretary [Ken Salazar](#) ordered an immediate review of the 30 [offshore drilling](#) rigs and 47 production platforms operating in the deepwater Gulf, and is sending teams to conduct on-site inspections.

The oil slick was only three miles offshore on Thursday afternoon and was expected to hit coastal Louisiana as early as Thursday night, prompting Gov. [Bobby Jindal](#) to declare a state of emergency and to request the participation of the National Guard in response efforts. About 40,000 feet of boom had been placed around Pass-a-Loutre, the area of the Mississippi River Delta where the oil was expected to touch first, a spokesman for Mr. Jindal said.

The Navy provided 50 contractors, 7 skimming systems and 66,000 feet of inflatable containment boom, a spokesman said. About 210,000 feet of boom had been laid down to protect the shoreline in several places along the Gulf Coast, though experts said that

marshlands presented a far more daunting cleaning challenge than sandy beaches.

Eight days after the first explosion on the rig, which left 11 workers missing and presumed dead, the tenor of the response team's briefings changed abruptly Wednesday night with a hastily called news conference to announce that the rate of the spill was estimated to be 5,000 barrels a day, or more than 200,000 gallons — five times the previous estimate. By Thursday, it was apparent that the cleanup operation desperately needed help, with no indication that the well would be sealed any time soon and oil drifting closer to shore.

The response effort has been driven by **BP**, the company that was leasing the rig and is responsible for the cleanup, under the oversight of the Coast Guard and in consultation with the Minerals Management Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. While additional federal resources, including naval support, were available before Wednesday, officials had given little indication that such reinforcements would be deployed so quickly and at such a scale.

“Some of it existed from the start,” Rear Adm. Mary E. Landry of the Coast Guard, the federal on-scene coordinator, said of the federal resources. “We can ramp it up as we need it.”

Referring to what she called “dynamic tension” among the participants in a spill response, Admiral Landry said it was her duty to ensure that BP was trying every approach available.

“If BP does not request these resources, then I can and I will,” she said.

Asked whether the Coast Guard had confidence in BP's efforts, Admiral Landry said, “BP, from Day 1, has attempted to be very responsive and be a very responsible spiller.”

BP, in turn, has pointed out on more than one occasion that **Transocean** owned the oil rig and the blowout preventer, a device that apparently failed to function properly and that is continuing to be the most significant obstacle to stopping the spill.

Underscoring how acute the situation has become, BP is soliciting ideas and techniques from four other major oil companies — Exxon Mobil, Chevron, Shell and Anadarko. BP officials have also requested help from the Defense Department in efforts to activate the blowout preventer, a stack of hydraulically activated valves at the top of the well that is designed to seal it off in the event of a sudden pressure release.

Doug Suttles, the chief operating officer for exploration and production for BP, said the company had asked the military for better imaging technology and more advanced remotely operated vehicles. As of now, there are six such vehicles monitoring or trying to fix the blowout preventer, which sits on the sea floor.

“To be frank, the offer of help from all quarters is welcome,” said David Nicholas, a BP spokesman.

But Norman Polmar, an expert on military systems, said the robotic submersibles used by the oil industry were better equipped to try to stop the oil leak than any of the Navy’s minisubs. The Navy’s unmanned subs have cameras and can retrieve bits of hardware, he said, but are not designed to plug a hole in a pipe or do repair work.

Other efforts to contain the spill included a tactic that Admiral Landry called “absolutely novel”: crews awaited approval on Thursday night to begin deploying chemical dispersants underwater near the source of the leaks. Aircraft have dropped nearly 100,000 gallons of the dispersants on the water’s surface to break down the oil, a more conventional strategy.

BP is also designing and building large boxlike structures that could be lowered over the leaks in the riser, the 5,000-foot-long pipe that connected the well to the rig and has since become detached and is snaking along the sea floor. The structures would contain the leaking oil and route it to the surface to be collected. This temporary solution could take several weeks to execute.

Mr. Suttles said three such structures were being prepared, one of which is complete and could corral the worst of the leaks. But citing the disclosure of the new leak on Wednesday night, experts said more were certainly possible.

“All that movement is going to continue to stress and fatigue the pipe and create more leaks,” said Jeffrey Short, Pacific science director for Oceana and former chemist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration who helped clean the spill from the [Exxon Valdez](#) in 1989.

“This is not on a good trajectory,” he added.

The next solution is drilling relief wells that would allow crews to plug the gushing cavity with

mud, concrete or other heavy liquid. The drilling of one such well is expected to begin in the next 48 hours, Mr. Suttles said, but it could be three months before the leak is plugged by this method.

The legal and political dimensions of the oil spill spread as well on Thursday, with lawyers filing suits on behalf of commercial fishermen, shrimpers and injured workers against BP; Transocean; Cameron, the company that manufactured the blowout preventer; and other companies involved in the drilling process, including Halliburton.

Representative [Edward J. Markey](#), a Massachusetts Democrat who is chairman of the Select Committee on Energy Independence and [Global Warming](#), has asked the heads of major oil companies, including BP, to testify at a hearing about the spill.

Opponents of [President Obama's](#) plan to expand offshore drilling have also called for a halt. Senator Bill Nelson, Democrat of Florida, called Thursday for a moratorium on all new offshore oil exploration while the cause of this rig explosion is under investigation. Mr. Nelson, a longtime opponent of oil drilling off the coasts of Florida, said in a letter to Mr. Obama that the spreading oil spill threatened environmental and economic disaster all along the Gulf Coast.

Administration officials stressed that the president's offshore drilling plan was the beginning of a lengthy review process and did not mean that large new areas would see immediate oil and gas activity. They also said that they expected that members of Congress and the public would have new questions about the safety of offshore operations and that the administration would rethink its commitment to offshore drilling in light of the accident.

"That is the beginning of a process," said [Carol M. Browner](#), the White House coordinator of energy and climate policy. "What is occurring now will also be taken into consideration."

Robbie Brown contributed reporting from Robert, La.; John M. Broder and Helene Cooper contributed from Washington; and Christopher Drew and Henry Fountain from New York.