



Gulf of Mexico oil spill sparks new US drilling ban

May 1, 2010 – The US administration has banned oil drilling in new areas of the US coast while the cause of the oil spill off Louisiana is investigated. White House adviser David Axelrod told ABC TV it wanted to know exactly what led to last week's explosion on the BP-operated rig in the Gulf of Mexico.

As many as 5,000 barrels of oil a day are thought to be spilling into the water, threatening US coastal areas. Florida Governor Charlie Crist declared a state of emergency on Friday. The order, which covers Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, Walton, Bay and Gulf counties, says the oil slick "is generally moving in a northerly direction and threatens Florida's coast".

Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal has already declared a state of emergency. The slick from the wreck of the rig has begun to reach the Louisiana shore and on Friday the state's National Guard was mobilised.

Heavy seas on Friday were pushing the slick towards the coast and over the booms meant to contain it. The US National Weather Service said strong winds, high tides and waves could push the oil into inlets, ponds and lakes in southeast Louisiana over the weekend.

Rescuers poised to treat affected wildlife had their first patient on Friday - a young gannett found offshore covered in thick, black oil.

It was taken to a treatment centre at Fort Jackson, south-east of New Orleans. Mr Axelrod announced the ban on drilling in new areas on ABC's Good Morning America programme. He also defended the administration's response to the 20 April explosion that destroyed the BP-operated Deepwater Horizon rig saying: "We had the coast guard in almost immediately."

Last month President Barack Obama eased a moratorium on new offshore drilling.

In a statement outside the White House on Friday, President Obama said he believed oil exploration was an important part of the US economy but it had to be done responsibly.

"BP is ultimately responsible... for paying the costs of response and clean-up operations but we are fully prepared to meet our responsibilities in all affected communities," he said.

He said five staging areas had been set up to protect sensitive shorelines and about 1,900 emergency workers and more than 300 ships and aircraft were on the scene.

He added that he had ordered a "thorough review" of what might be required "to prevent accidents like this from happening again".

A BP spokesman in London, Toby Odone, told the BBC his company would face up to its obligations but did not bear sole responsibility for the oil spill.

"We... take responsibility for the environmental consequences of that accident and we are obviously fully committed to taking all possible steps to contain the spread of the oil spill," he said.

"The rig was owned and was the responsibility of Transocean, which is a drilling company which operates all over the world."

He said BP would continue to prospect for new sources of oil.

"We are responsible to our shareholders to continue to do the thing which we do best, which is to explore for and to produce oil and gas," he said.

The US government has designated the oil spill an "incident of national significance" which allows it to draw on resources from across the country.

The wetlands off the Louisiana coast sustain hundreds of wildlife species and a big seafood and fishing industry.

The US Coast Guard said it had sent investigators to confirm whether crude oil had begun to wash up on parts of the Louisiana shoreline.

Cdr Mark McCadden, of the coast guard, told the BBC: "We're putting everything forth in plans for a worst-case scenario. The Louisiana coastline, with its rich shrimp and oyster beds, is the most threatened by the spill. A group of Louisiana shrimpers has already filed a lawsuit against BP and the owners of the rig, Transocean.

Richard Arsenault, a lawyer for the group, told the BBC: "The harm right now to the fishing industry and to the economic sector is just almost incalculable."

There are also fears of severe damage to fisheries and wildlife in Mississippi, Alabama and Florida.

An emergency shrimping season was opened on Thursday to allow fishermen to bring in their catch before it was fouled by the advancing oil.

Navy vessels are helping to deploy booms to contain the spill.

President Obama has dispatched high-level administration officials, including Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, to the area.

At a news conference on Friday, Ms Napolitano said the US government would continue to push BP for a strong response to the spill. Eleven workers are still missing, presumed dead, after the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded.

"Right now the priority is to bring as many resources as are available to attack this spill."

Two US Air Force planes have been sent to Mississippi in case they are needed to spray oil-dispersing chemicals over the slick.