



NEW ORLEANS (AP) — The sea calmed Tuesday, helping efforts to fight a massive oil slick in the Gulf of Mexico but providing scant comfort for people along beaches and bayous waiting anxiously to find out when and where the mess might come ashore.



A Monday, May 3, 2010 photo provided by **Richard J. Arsenault** shows oil slick on the ocean surface near the Chanteleur Barrier Island Chain off the coast of Louisiana, seen in background. The weather calmed Tuesday, May 4, 2010, and people watch and wait for the weather and ocean currents to determine where the slick would finally come ashore. (AP Photo/Frank L. Willis)

So far only sheens have reached into some coastal waters, and the oil's slow movement despite an uncapped seafloor gusher has given crews and volunteers time to lay boom in front of shorelines. That effort was stymied by choppy seas into the weekend, but officials were optimistic Tuesday as the sun came out and winds eased.

Coast Guard spokesman David Mosley said Tuesday that rig operator BP PLC would continue trying to cap the leak and authorities hoped to dump chemicals from an airplane to help break up the sheen.

The uncertainty has been trying for people who live along a swath of the Gulf from Louisiana to Florida. The undersea well has been spewing 200,000 gallons a day since an April 20 explosion aboard the drilling rig Deepwater Horizon that killed 11 workers. The rig was owned by Transocean Ltd.

"You mentally want to push it back to the west, and then you feel guilty for doing so," said Jan Grant, manager at the St. George Inn on St. George Island, Fla., about the path the spill might take.

BP has been unable to shut off the well, but crews have reported progress with a new method for cutting the amount of oil that reaches the surface. They're using a remotely operated underwater vehicle to pump chemicals called dispersants into the oil as it pours from the well, to break it up before it rises. Results were encouraging but the approach is still being evaluated, BP and Coast Guard officials said.

The latest satellite image of the slick, taken Sunday night, indicates that it has shrunk since last week, but that only means some of the oil has gone underwater.

The new image found oil covering about 2,000 square miles, rather than the roughly 3,400 square miles observed last Thursday, said Hans Graber of the University of Miami.

Fishing has been shut down in federal waters from the Mississippi River to the Florida Panhandle, leaving boats idle Monday in the middle of the prime spring season. A special season to allow boats to gather shrimp before it gets coated in oil will close Tuesday evening.

The effect on wildlife is still unclear. No oil has been found on 29 dead endangered Kemp's ridley turtles that were examined by experts after washing up on the beaches along the Mississippi coast over the past few days.

But Moby Solangi, director of the Institute for Marine Mammal Studies in Gulfport, said tissue samples would be sent off to labs for further review. Experts have warned that just because no oil is found on the turtles that doesn't mean they didn't consume contaminated fish or come into contact with toxins.

Meanwhile, crews haven't been able to activate a shutout valve underwater. And it could take another week before a 98-ton concrete-and-metal box is placed over one of the leaks to capture the oil.

Worse, it could take three months to drill sideways into the well and plug it with mud and concrete to stop the worst U.S. oil spill since the tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground in Alaska, leaking nearly 11 million gallons of crude.

Those nowhere near the Gulf who drink coffee, eat shrimp, like fruit or plan to buy a new set of tires could also end up paying for the disaster.

A total shutdown of Mississippi River shipping lanes is unlikely. But there could be long delays if cargo vessels that move millions of tons of fruit, rubber, grain, steel and other commodities in and out of the nation's interior are forced to wait to have their oil-coated hulls power-washed to avoid contaminating the Mississippi. Some cargo ships might choose to unload somewhere else in the U.S. That could drive up costs.

"Let's say it gets real bad. It gets blocked off and they don't let anything in. They lose time, and they are very concerned about that," said river pilot Michael Lorino. "It's going to be very costly if they have to unload that cargo in another port and ship it back here because it was destined for here."

BP said Monday it would compensate people for "legitimate and objectively verifiable" claims from the explosion and spill, but President Barack Obama and others pressed the company to explain exactly what that means.

For the tourism industry, the spill couldn't come at a worse time. Restaurant owners and inkeepers said they are already getting calls about the spill.

"It's the beginning of the booking season, the beginning of the summer season," said Marie Curren, sales director for Brett/Robinson, a real estate firm in Gulf Shores, Ala. "The only thing that could make it worst now is a hurricane."

Florida Gov. Charlie Crist toured an Escambia County emergency operations center and said while the Panhandle would see the first impact from the spill, the entire state should be prepared.

"If and when it gets into the Gulf Stream, that will take it around the Gulf of Mexico potentially down to the Keys and around the Atlantic side. Now, I don't want to be an alarmist, but I want to be a realist. And I just think we all need to be prepared to do whatever we can to protect our state. It's precious."

Dana Powell expects at least some lost business at the Paradise Inn in Pensacola Beach, Fla., and could see a different type of guest altogether: Instead of families boating, parasailing and fishing, workers on cleanup crews will probably be renting her rooms.

"They won't be having as much fun," she said, "but they might be buying more liquor at the bar, because they'll be so depressed."

And what will she serve in her restaurant? Hamburgers and chicken fingers instead of crab claws.

By all accounts, the disaster is certain to cost BP billions. But analysts said the company could handle it; BP is the world's third-largest oil company and made more than \$6 billion in the first three months of this year. The oil spill has drained \$32 billion from BP's stock market value.

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