

New report on Gulf oil spill shows BP ignored warning signs

By Hiram Lee
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A new report on the causes of the April 20 explosion aboard the Deepwater Horizon oil rig and the blowout of BP's Macondo well, which led to the worst oil spill in history, reveals oil giant BP ignored warning signs and used inadequate procedures to secure the integrity of the Macondo well.

The report, compiled by the National Academy of Engineering (NAE) and the National Research Council (NRC), states that “failures and missed indications of hazard were not isolated events during the preparation of the Macondo well for temporary abandonment. Numerous decisions to proceed toward abandonment despite indications of hazard, such as the results of repeated negative-pressure tests, suggest an insufficient consideration of risk and a lack of operating discipline.” The report goes on to say that the “net effect” of these decisions was to “reduce the available margins of safety that take into account complexities of the hydrocarbon reservoirs and well geology discovered through drilling and the subsequent changes in the execution of the well plan.”

Such findings are significant. If BP were to be found guilty of criminal negligence in its operations in the Gulf, the company could face fines of \$4,300 for each barrel of oil spilled. Because of the unprecedented amount of oil spilled into the Gulf, BP could stand to lose billions of dollars.

The NAE report lists incidents in which BP chose to proceed with operations in spite of repeated signs of danger. Among the most dangerous choices made by BP was the company's decision to ignore test results which indicated a buildup of pressure in the Macondo well system following the installation of cement well casing.

The report states that “after the long string of casing was cemented in the Macondo well, repeated

negative-pressure tests clearly showed a marked pressure buildup inside the casing after the drilling mud was displaced with sea water.” Had an effective cement barrier been put into place, there should have been no rise in pressure. Even though BP had not been able to establish well integrity in these tests, the corporation continued operations.

Also contributing to the Macondo blowout, the report found that the company used only six centralizers (devices used to keep the well casing centered in the wellbore during cementing between the casing and rock formation) even though “modeling results suggested that many more centralizers would have been needed.” BP also failed to incorporate a “float shoe” at the bottom of the well casing; this device contains a check valve that would have activated automatically in the event of an emergency, serving as an extra barrier against the flow of hydrocarbons back into the system.

The report also found that BP chose to carry on with the removal of drilling mud from the Macondo without first installing a device known as a lockdown sleeve on the production casing's wellhead seals. This would have ensured that any pressure built up beneath the seals would not have been able to shift their position.

These repeated and egregiously negligent acts carried out by BP occurred in the absence of adequate regulation and oversight. Among the significant problems among regulatory agencies, the report cited insufficient education and certification for regulators. The report states that the US Department of Interior's Outer Continental Shelf Safety Oversight Board found the Minerals Management Service “did not have a formal training and certification program for its inspectors.”

While the NAE report is the latest to uncover evidence of gross negligence on the part of BP, the

officials in that company as well as those of Transocean and Haliburton, the three corporations chiefly responsible for the Deepwater Horizon disaster, have not been held accountable. Promises of criminal investigations made by the Obama administration early on in the disaster have been dropped. Instead, the Obama administration has worked to whitewash the size and scope of the disaster.

With the leaking Macondo well finally “killed” in September, the administration is seeking to put the entire ordeal behind it. The moratorium on offshore drilling was lifted ahead of schedule, with no significant changes to safety practices within the industry, and BP has returned to profitability. The people of the Gulf have been left with an ecological, economic, and public health disaster that will continue for years.

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