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## Oil spill: US failing to tighten ecological oversight, say activists

Charges that ecological review waived on 26 new offshore drilling projects come as latest attempt to seal well fail

**Suzanne Goldenberg**

US environment correspondent

The Obama administration waived environmental reviews for 26 new offshore drilling projects even as the BP oil disaster spewed hundreds of thousands of gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico, environmental activists said today.

The charge came as hopes for a quick fix to the Deepwater Horizon spill were dashed when a build-up of crystallised gas blocked pipes in a huge metal containment box that had been built to cap the well. Engineers are now considering a “junk shot”, shooting a mix of debris – including shredded tires and golf balls – into the well at high pressure to clog it, said Thad Allen, a US coast guard commander.

With the spill still unchecked and spreading to Alabama’s beaches, there was renewed focus on oversight procedures that allowed BP and Transocean to drill without backup plans in place.

The Centre for Biological Diversity said that even after the disaster, the Obama administration did not tighten its oversight of offshore drilling. An investigation by the respected environmental group revealed that since 20 April, when an explosion the Deepwater Horizon rig killed 11



Engineers are considering a ‘junk shot’ – shooting debris into the well as high pressure – to seal the Deepwater Horizon wellhead.

*Photograph: Daniel Beltra/Greenpeace*

workers, 27 new offshore drilling projects have been approved by the Mineral Management Service (MMS) the regulatory agency responsible for overseeing extraction of oil, gas and other minerals.

All but one project was granted similar exemptions from environmental review as BP. Two were submitted by the UK firm, and made the same claims about oil-rig safety and the implausibility of a spill damaging the environment, the centre said.

“This oil spill has had absolutely no effect on MMS behaviour at all,” said Kieran Suckling, the director of the centre. “It’s still business as usual which

means rubber stamping oil drilling permits with no environmental review.”

The charges were the latest in a string of revelations about lax oversight of offshore drilling that, while dating back to the George Bush era, have also damaged the Obama White House. “I don’t know where the regulators were on this. They certainly were asleep,” Richard Shelby, a Republican senator from Alabama, told CNN today. “This reminds me of a big truck speeding along the Los Angeles freeway with no brakes.”

With the Deepwater wellhead pumping 795,000 litres (210,000 gallons) of oil into the sea each day,

authorities sought to stop its spread to the Alabama coastline.

Allen said a gate was being built to protect the port of Mobile, but owing to the unpredictability of winds and currents he said the entire region should remain on alert. "The entire Gulf pretty much has to be on guard," he told CBS television.

BP crews were forced on yesterday to abandon their efforts to put a box over the leak after a combination of ice crystals, high pressure, and low temperatures made the 100-tonne contraption too buoyant.

It was unclear whether BP would make a new attempt. "I wouldn't say it has failed yet," Doug Suttles, the firm's chief operating officer, told reporters. But Allen said BP was now looking at sealing the well with the junk shot.

The latest failure to seal the wellhead has deepened fears about the economic and environmental impact of the spill, which is on course to surpass the Exxon Valdez disaster.

"What it means is that we are most likely looking at one of the worst case scenarios," said Jacqueline Savitz, a scientist for the Oceana conservation

group. "The longer it gushes, and the more oil it spews, the more animals are going to be affected."

The prospect of oil continuing to gush until BP manages to drill a relief well in two or three months time has intensified concerns among those states now on the spill's trajectory.

Florida's Democratic senator, Bill Nelson, said the spill threatened his state's fishing and tourism industries and even its military bases. "You are talking about massive economic losses," he told CNN.

Environmental and safety procedures on the Deepwater Horizon rig will come under even greater scrutiny this week as multiple investigations into the disaster get underway. In Louisiana, the coast guard and the MMS will start their inquiries with two days of public hearings.

The justice department is also conducting an investigation into the spill and has not ruled out criminal charges. "I've sent down representatives from the justice department to examine what our options are with regard to the activities that occurred there and whether or not there has been malfeasance on the part of BP or Transocean," Eric Holder,

the US attorney general, told ABC television.

Three separate congressional committees will also take a close look at offshore drilling and the disaster this week, with testimony from the executives of BP America, Transocean, the company which owned the sunken rig, and Halliburton, which made the cement cap on the well, whose failure set the disaster in motion.

BP's initial investigations suggest the blast was caused by a bubble of methane gas that shot up through the drill column and broke several protective seals and barriers, the Associated Press reported.

With oil still gushing into the Gulf of Mexico nearly three weeks after the initial explosion, the continuing catastrophe saw commentators from Al Gore to Fidel Castro weighing in at the weekend.

The Cuban leader, in a piece in the local media, said the spill was further evidence of corporate.

"The ecological disaster which occurred in the Gulf of Mexico shows how little can governments do against those who control financial capital," he wrote, adding "The hateful tyranny imposed on the world."