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Five questions for Obama on the oil spill

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As his administration comes under increasing criticism for its handling of the spreading environmental catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico, President Obama will hold a White House news conference Thursday, his first since February, in an attempt to retake command of the message. He'll do so as the crisis reaches yet another moment of high risk, both in the Gulf and in Washington.

At the scene of the oil spill, the oil firm BP -- attempting the latest of inventive but thus far ineffective maneuvers to stop the gusher that has been spewing from the gulf floor for five weeks -- has begun to pour 50,000 barrels of dense mud into the well. The exercise, known as a "top kill," has effectively stopped other spills in the past but has never been tried at the mile-down depth of this one.

Meanwhile, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar is scheduled to deliver the results of a review demanded by Obama that gives an accounting of the federal government's policies with regard to energy exploration on the outer continental shelf, including whether there are adequate safeguards with respect to regulations and inspections. Obama is expected to announce a series of new policies in response.

The news conference will also come on the day before the president travels to the gulf to inspect the scene and also to send a message of engagement. With

reporters having their first opportunity to put a full range of questions to Obama about the spill and his administration's handling of it, here are five that should be asked:

1. In explaining and defending your decision in March to open up additional offshore areas to drilling, you argued that improvements in technology have made drilling significantly less risky. Just 18 days before the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig, you said: "It turns out, by the way, that oil rigs today generally don't cause spills. They are technologically very advanced." What kind of assurances were you given that this was the case and by whom? What do you think of those assumptions now?

2. BP is now in the position of making many of the key decisions on how to deal with it -- a situation that is drawing growing criticism. White House officials note the administration is following a process established under the 1990 Oil Spill Act, which was passed in response to the Exxon Valdez incident; they also concede that the government, effectively, has no choice but to let BP take the lead because it lacks the equipment and expertise to do the job. In at least one instance in which the federal government has attempted to overrule BP, which was over its use of dispersant chemicals that the Environmental Protection Agency says are too toxic, the company has not complied. What do you say to those who say too much control has been ceded to BP? And

what kind of changes, if any, should be made in the process for dealing with future oil spills?

3. Salazar has pledged reform of the Minerals Management Service, the agency responsible for offshore drilling, which is now recognized as having been too compliant with the wishes of the oil industry. But his proposals -- for instance, splitting the agency into separate leasing, revenue collection and oversight -- have dealt largely with the organization of the MMS. If the problem is, as you have said, a cozy culture in the agency, is it enough simply to redraw the organization chart? How can you quickly change a culture that has taken decades to develop?

4. On May 6, Salazar announced a moratorium on the issuance of final permits for "new offshore drilling activity." Critics such as the Center for Biological Diversity note, however, that this policy has never been put into writing, and that its definition "has become steadily narrower as the Interior Department changes it to exclude whatever drilling permits MMS issues on any given day." And the New York Times has reported that since the April 20 explosion on the rig, waivers have continued to be granted for drilling projects. What, exactly, does this moratorium cover?

5. Should anyone in the government be fired as the result of this disaster?

Washington Post staff writer Juliet Eilperin contributed to this report.

