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Oil spill taking toll on BP's credibility — and the government's

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WASHINGTON — A litany of half-truths, withholding crucial video, blocking media access to the site and a failure to share timely and complete information have created the widespread impression that BP is suppressing the facts about the largest oil spill in U.S. history, if not misleading the public and the government.

The government has been little better, for weeks blindly accepting BP's estimates of the size of the spill that began on April 22, all but powerless to force the company to curb its use of toxic chemical dispersants and ignoring warnings from its own officials about possible worker safety violations.

Most damning, say members of Congress, was BP's failure to release video that would help measure how much oil is being released from the broken well — a number that will be key evidence when federal investigators and perhaps juries consider what damages BP should pay.

A government task force last week found that twice BP's original estimate — and possibly much more — has been spewing out of the well each day.

"What's clear is that BP has had an

interest in low-balling the size of their accident, since every barrel spilled increases how much they could be fined by the government," said Rep. Ed Markey, D-Mass., who led the push to force the company to make its video feed publicly available.

His administration should have pushed harder and sooner for the video information, President Barack Obama acknowledged in a press conference Thursday. It's "a legitimate concern to question whether BP's interests in being fully forthcoming about the extent of the damage is aligned with the public interest," he said, adding: "We have to verify whatever it is they say about the damage."

The company's reports on the progress of its so-called top kill operations, which had been pumping heavy drilling mud into the well in an effort to stop the flow of oil and gas — an effort the company abandoned late Saturday — have raised more questions about its candor.

Early Thursday morning, after the operation began, BP issued a press release saying that operations "continued over the night and are ongoing. There are no significant events to report at this time."

Later in the day, however, BP's Chief Operating Officer, Doug Suttles, acknowledged that the

company had been stopping and restarting the procedure without disclosing that.

On Friday afternoon, when he was asked whether anyone should believe the company's claims, Suttles said top executives had been on television and in front of cameras all day, offering updates.

"I do believe we've improved the frequency since yesterday," he said. "We're trying to provide as much data as we can . . . as we've stressed, the government is in watching, with the job. They're part of the decision making in every step of the job, so there's a tremendous amount of transparency here."

Coast Guard Rear Adm. Mary Landry, the federal on-scene coordinator, backed Suttles. Government officials, including Energy Secretary Steven Chu, are "in the command center watching this fulltime right along side the industry," she said. "So there's no attempt to not be fully forthright with you about what's going on. We will be fully forthright with you about what's going on."

Local officials in Louisiana also have accused BP of stage-managing the response by assigning 400 workers to Grand Isle, La. when Obama visited there on Friday. Those workers left soon after the president did, Jefferson Parish Council Chairman John

Young complained to reporters.

Saturday, Suttles denied that the workers were staged there for photos, saying they'd been out in the hot sun all day, and their shift was over in the afternoon.

"This was not window dressing," Suttles said. "If you went there today, you'd find people there working. It wasn't associated with the president, I can assure you of that."

Tom Brennan, who helped manage the initial public relations response to the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill, said it was clear that BP's corporate culture continues to have major flaws that can't be covered up with photo opportunities or slick public relations. That's despite a pledge by top company officials to address organizational and safety deficiencies at all levels of BP following a 2005 explosion at a refinery in Texas that killed 15 people and injured 170.

"You can feel sorry for them for one major accident, but they've had three major accidents in recent years: the big Texas refinery disaster, the big oil spill at Prudhoe Bay and now this in the Gulf of Mexico," Brennan said.

"There's no PR people in the world that can do anything with that, other than try to keep their heads down," he said. "The company as a whole is obviously going to have to shake up its whole system."

As oil begins coating the Louisiana

shoreline, those facing the loss of their livelihoods are questioning the veracity of both the company responsible for the accident and their government.

They've been unable to get good answers from anyone, said the Rev. Tyronne Edwards, who runs a community development organization in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana that's helping fishermen file claims with BP.

"It's obvious BP's lying. It's criminal what they're doing," he said. "But the government cannot be let off the hook, either. I voted for Obama but he's weak on this issue here."

For the families of the 11 men who died when the Deepwater Horizon exploded, the public relations dance has been difficult to watch.

Many are especially concerned that two top BP executives aboard the rig, known as "company men," didn't testify last week at a joint U.S. Coast Guard-Minerals Management Service inquiry into the cause of the accident.

Robert Kaluza invoked his Fifth Amendment right to avoid self-incrimination; the other company man aboard the rig, Don Vidrine, was on an original witness list but also declined to testify because of an undisclosed illness.

Without their testimony, there's no public accounting of their decision-making, said Keith Jones of Baton Rouge, La., the father of 28-year-old

mudroom engineer Gordon Jones. As an attorney himself, he respects the fact-finding process, Jones said, but it bothers him that the company men aren't talking.

"The truth? I know this: BP has a lot of explaining to do, because it was their rig, it was their company man who made those decisions," he said.

Still, BP isn't alone in the blame, say environmentalists who've been working since the April 20 explosion to shed light on regulatory failures. As soon as they began looking into the environmental reviews that were done in the Gulf of Mexico, "we realized that there weren't any environmental reviews being done," said Rebecca Noblin, the Center for Biological Diversity's Alaska director.

Many of the promises from both the government and the industry about the safety of offshore drilling were proven untrue by what has happened in the Gulf of Mexico, Noblin said.

"BP, and the oil industry in general, has managed to get away with a lot," she said. "But the reason I go back to the government is oil companies' jobs — their focus is to make money. If they're allowed to take shortcuts, of course they will. And it's the government's job to make sure that they're not allowed to do that. Bottom line, our government shouldn't let the oil companies do what they're doing."

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