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## Efforts to Repel Oil Spill Are Described as Chaotic

By **CAMPBELL ROBERTSON**

GRAND ISLE, La. — Deano Bonano, the emergency preparedness director for Jefferson Parish, marched from a motor home being used as a command center to an office across the street filled with **BP** officials.

It was late May. Oil had been creeping into the passes around Grand Isle. Two fleets of fishing boats were supposed to be laying out boom, the long floating barriers to corral **oil** and protect the fragile marshes of Barataria Bay.

But the boats were gathered on the inland side of the bay — the wrong side — anchored idly as the oil oozed in from the Gulf of Mexico. **BP** officials said they had no way of contacting the workers on the boats, Mr. Bonano recalled.

“You’re watching the oil come in,” Mr. Bonano said, “and they can’t even move.”

For much of the last two months, the focus of the response to the Deepwater Horizon explosion has been a mile underwater, 50 miles from shore, where successive efforts involving containment domes, “top kills” and “junk shots” have failed, and a “spillcam” shows tens of thousands of barrels of oil hemorrhaging into the gulf each day.

Closer to shore, the efforts to keep the oil away from land have not fared much better, despite a response effort involving thousands of boats, tens of thousands of workers and millions of feet of containment boom.

From the beginning, the effort has been bedeviled by a lack of preparation, organization, urgency and clear lines of authority among federal, state and local officials, as well as BP. As a result, officials and experts say, the damage to the coastline and wildlife has been worse than it might have been if the response had been faster and orchestrated more effectively.

“The present system is not working,” Senator Bill Nelson of Florida said Thursday at a hearing in Washington devoted to assessing the spill and the response. Oil had just entered Florida waters, Senator Nelson said, adding that no one was notified at either the state or local level, a failure of communication that echoed Mr. Bonano’s story and countless others along the Gulf Coast.

“The information is not flowing,” Senator Nelson said. “The decisions are not timely. The resources are not produced. And as a result, you have a big mess, with no command and control.”

They were supposed to be better prepared. When the [Exxon Valdez](#) ran aground in Alaska in 1989, skimmers, booms and dispersants were in short supply for the response, which was led by a consortium of oil companies in which BP was the majority stakeholder.

A year later, lawmakers passed the federal [Oil Pollution Act](#) to ensure that plans were in place for oil spills, so the response effort would be quick, with clear responsibilities for everyone involved.

Every region of the country was required to have a contingency plan, tailored for its unique geography, for responding to a spill.

But Leslie Pearson, a private oil-spill response consultant, said federal oversight of spill contingency plans largely amounts to accepting what oil industry operators say they can do, rather than demanding they demonstrate that they can actually do it.

“Their plans don’t say, ‘Within X amount of time it has to be controlled and industry needs to prove how the heck you’re going to do that,’ ” she said.

She and other critics of the federal government’s response point to parts of the world where they say foreign governments have stricter rules for offshore operators. In the Canadian Arctic, for example, some offshore operators are required to have ships on close standby to drill relief

wells more quickly than the ones being drilled in the gulf.

While the United States requires operators to be prepared to drill relief wells, their contingency plans do not have to specify a firm timeline for how quickly they will do so, experts said.

Some states have tried to establish tougher rules within their jurisdictions. In Prince William Sound, where the Valdez ran aground, for example, Alaska requires all tankers to be accompanied by two escort vessels. Enough equipment also has to be at the ready to remove up to 300,000 barrels of oil in 72 hours.

Scott Schaefer, the deputy administrator of California's Office of Spill Prevention and Response, said his state's regulations also went beyond federal law, requiring, among other things, repeated tests of response equipment.

Mr. Schaefer, who is now in Mobile, Ala., working to fight the oil spill there, declined to characterize the level of preparation in the gulf. He did note, though, that many other experts had flown in from California, including scientists trained in gauging damage to sensitive areas and experts in aerial imaging to study the density of oil in the water.

"They've got their programs here and they're pretty proud of them," he said. "I think on the West Coast it's just much bigger and better funded."

Still, said Ms. Pearson, the consultant, states have limited tools to deal with offshore drilling in federal waters, as was the case with the Deepwater Horizon.

And by the time oil arrives at a coastline, she said, "you've lost the response."

Many experts also said that no plan could really fight this leak perfectly, and that the problem was more with the regulations that allowed it to happen in the first place.

"I don't think there's a person in the spill world who would have thought that whole thing would be contained and recovered," said Elise DeCola, a response consultant based in Massachusetts. "Whether or not you decide to drill is a policy decision, a calculated risk. Everyone at the end of the day understands that risk. It's kind of damage control from the start."

## **Beyond the Worst Case**

There were at least five plans governing the response to this spill, including national and regional plans drawn up by the Coast Guard and federal and state authorities, as well as lengthy plans prepared by BP. Each one either failed to consider a continuing blowout or drastically underplayed the effects of one.

“I will tell you that nobody in their plan foresaw this incident,” said Capt. Roger Laferriere of the Coast Guard, who is directing cleanup efforts in Houma, La. “Nobody.”

The contingency plan for southeast Louisiana, which was drawn up by a committee led by the Coast Guard and a state representative, specifically mentions the possibility of a blowout and includes a worst case of a million-barrel spill, which is significantly short of even conservative estimates of the current spill.

But like other federal plans, it does not anticipate the possibility that the leak could continue for weeks. It concludes, for example, that such a spill would require the use of 38,400 gallons of dispersant, or roughly 3 percent of what has been applied in the last two months.

The BP plans do consider an uncontrolled blowout, one that releases 240,000 barrels a day into the gulf for at least 100 days — far worse than the current spill.

In the event of such an enormous spill, according to these plans, “no significant adverse impacts are expected” to beaches, wetlands or coast-dwelling birds.

Toby Odone, a BP spokesman, said in an e-mail message that the company’s oil spill response plan was “fully approved” by the [Minerals Management Service](#).

“The plan does not, and cannot, prevent an oil spill or any impact from the spill, but it establishes the framework under which the company will respond,” he wrote. “This is the framework we and the unified command have been using in what is the largest oil spill response in US history.”

Adm. [Thad W. Allen](#) of the Coast Guard, the national commander for the spill, said in an interview that shortcomings in the response did not stem from the actions described in the plans, but from the risk assessment on which those plans were based.

“I think they’re adequate to the assumptions in the plans,” Admiral Allen said. “I think you need to go back and question the assumptions.”

Admiral Allen said that in the future, the Coast Guard would probably need to review the oil company contingency plans — which are approved by the Minerals Management Service and not the Coast Guard — “for the purpose of executability” in a response. But mostly, he said, everyone would need to re-examine the worst-case scenarios.

The potential spills contemplated in the plans drawn up by federal authorities are monolithic slicks. The spill in the gulf, Admiral Allen said, is a series of large spills spreading in every direction from Louisiana to Florida, underwater and on the surface.

This creates a different situation entirely.

“The Coast Guard will need to take a look at this new scenario, and how we are going to address this happening in the future,” Captain Laferriere said. “This is the new, defining worst-case scenario.”

The reason for the inclusion of worst-case scenarios in these plans is for officials to ensure that enough supplies, like boom and oil skimmers, are on hand to respond to a spill.

Now critical boom is being flown in from the north shore of Alaska and oil skimming boats are coming from as far away as Norway. Requirements for more so-called mechanical response equipment, as opposed to chemical dispersant, fell short of current needs.

A 1999 Coast Guard report recommended that a mechanical response — using equipment like boom, skimmers and absorbent materials largely marshaled by boat and from land — should be increased by as much as 25 percent.

But over the next several years, lobbyists for oil companies pushed to keep the existing standard in place and emphasized the use of chemical dispersant.

Fred Felleman, an environmental consultant based in Seattle who has worked to strengthen spill prevention and response efforts in Northwest ports, said the oil industry’s preference for dispersants was driven in part by economics.

“It’s very expensive to have people on the ground trained and ready to deploy, under contract,” Mr. Felleman said.

In rules formally published last August, the Coast Guard effectively overruled its 1999 report, declining to require the substantial increase in the amount of mechanical response equipment.

However, in comments published along with the rules, the Coast Guard said that it “recognizes that the amount of mechanical recovery equipment is still inadequate to address the worst-case threat.”

There is no excuse for the failure in the plans to anticipate the situation now unfolding, said Mark Davis, director of the Tulane Institute on Water Resources Law and Policy and a longtime advocate for the protection of Louisiana wetlands.

He pointed out that it has been more than 30 years since the catastrophic *Ixtoc I* blowout in Mexico in 1979, which lasted for 10 months and released 3.7 million barrels of oil.

But, Mr. Davis acknowledged, hindsight will not help with the operation in the gulf.

“You pull the ripcord on the parachute you packed,” he said. “Not the parachute you wish you had packed.”

### **Unclear Leadership**

At the very least, these plans, which devote pages and flow charts to command structure, were meant to have an efficient hierarchy in place as soon as a spill occurred. That structure has often been unwieldy, and to some, hardly evident at all.

“I still don’t know who’s in charge,” Billy Nungesser, the president of Plaquemines Parish, said at the Senate hearing on Thursday, seven weeks after the Deepwater Horizon rig sank. “Is it BP? Is it the Coast Guard?”

Governance is inherently complicated by the players who are thrown together: BP officials work alongside federal officials who rebuke them publicly, and federal officials work closely with officials at the state level, who have been equally public in their condemnation of the response.

Gov. [Bobby Jindal](#) of Louisiana, for example, has drawn local support for his fact-filled critiques

of the response plans, but every 48 hours a state representative cooperates on those same plans with BP and the Coast Guard.

“I told him, when he signs the plan he’s endorsing our projects,” said Captain Laferriere, adding that he and the representative sit in the same office. “Louisiana is still learning the process.”

But Garret Graves, the governor’s senior coastal adviser, said that the state’s power was limited: the state strongly disapproves of the amount of chemical dispersant being used, he said, and feels that the supply of boom is drastically inadequate.

The main problems, many here say, have been sluggish response times and a consistent impression that no one is in charge.

Reports of oil reaching shore have been made days before any vessels were seen in the area. After squalls, booms have ended up tangled like spaghetti on the shores of wildlife-rich islands, only to remain like that for days with no response workers in sight.

“We are making adjustments every day to improve our efforts,” Mr. Odone of BP wrote. “For example, we initially struggled with the logistics of getting crews to work, but have made major improvement since to make sure this happens.”

Requests to the response operation, no matter how small, have required approval, a process that state and local officials said could take days or weeks. Some requests were never answered at all.

“You would throw it into the dark black hole and it might not ever come back,” Ralph Mitchell, the public safety director for Terrebonne Parish, said of early requests for boom.

On the other hand, the flurry of planning on the parish and state levels meant just that: more plans, more officials and more chains of command in an effort that was already sprawling. Parish officials have taken helicopters to observe coastline shortly after Coast Guard or BP officials did, duplicating efforts out of distrust.

Admiral Allen, echoing Mr. Nungesser, said that he had had to learn the lines of authority within Louisiana, and that in recent weeks, he had adapted the centralized command structure to the “home rule economy” of the parishes.

More decision-making authority has been given to Coast Guard officers at the local level, a move that has been broadly welcomed here after weeks of growing frustration.

“The effectiveness of the effort came way late,” said Forrest A. Travirca III, a field inspector for a local land trust that includes the nine-mile beachfront at Port Fourchon, La., and 35,000 acres of marshland behind it.

Until recently, Mr. Travirca said, “there was no direction. It was just chaotic. There was this group doing something, that group doing something. Nobody knowing who was doing what.”

### **Crews on the Ground**

BP’s growing cleanup operation, which includes more than 100 companies and has already cost \$1.6 billion, has left an often dangerous vacuum of guidance and direction in one of the most fragile ecosystems on earth.

Cleanup workers on Queen Bess Island, La., have been spotted trampling pelican nesting grounds and tossing around pelican eggs.

Yellow caution tape has been strung up on beaches to keep the news media and civilians out, only to end up in the marsh, where it could harm birds and small mammals.

On the beach at Port Fourchon, Mr. Travirca said, cleanup workers left oil-soaked mops on the beach for days, where the tides buried them in the sand. The workers were finally told to pick up the mops and put them in garbage bags, which they did — but not before shaking the mops out and strewing the beach with oil again.

While officials and residents of southern Louisiana have criticized a response that has sometimes been absent, they have also often criticized the cleanup crews that do show up.

“BP could fire all their contractors because they’re doing absolutely nothing but destroying our marsh,” Mr. Nungesser told the Senate panel.

David Camardelle, the mayor of Grand Isle and others complained that the employees in BP’s sprawling response are often outsiders who are not familiar with the fragile marshes and not local fishermen who most need the jobs.



Typically, spill cleanup workers are men and women who are found by temporary staffing agencies in unemployment lines and through classified ads, often with little education and few job prospects. They receive training and then wait to be called into action when an accident occurs.

These staffing agencies have contracts with environmental cleanup firms, which in turn have contracts with another company, in most cases the responsible party. But this spill operation is different from others because of the sheer number of contractors involved, making it difficult not only for officials demanding accountability but for the contractors themselves.

The agencies, some of them quite small, are paying out hundreds of thousands of dollars, if not more, in wages, but in many cases have not been able to reach through layers upon layers of contractors to the ultimate paymaster, BP.

Several expressed concern that if the labor needs increased with the scale of the cleanup and they still did not have guarantees from BP, they may have to pull out.

“There’s way too many players in it,” said an owner of one of the staffing agencies involved, who did not want to publicly criticize the process. “You don’t know who’s getting money from where.”

For now, the problem is not that people are working without pay, but the opposite. Trained workers are brought in by the hundreds to an area so that they will be in place if work needs to be done. In some of these areas, there is no work to be done. But under the contract, they need to be paid anyway.

“Our people aren’t out on the beach,” the owner of another agency said, lamenting the lack of organization. “They’re sitting under a tree and getting paid a full day.”

The cleanup operation has also been, at times, a casualty of politics. One staffing agency sent more than 150 trained workers to the Gulf Coast only to be told that in light of local and state insistence on exclusively local employment, too many of the workers were from out of state. They were all let go the next day.

### **A Barrier’s Limits**

One of the most vivid images in news reports on the oil spill has been boom, the lengths of orange and yellow barrier that are anchored to the seafloor and either keep oil at bay or corral it so it can be skimmed. From the earliest days, politicians have been demanding it, officials have been promising more of it and now nearly 400 miles of it is in place in gulf waters.

But it has also become a potent symbol of the problems with the response effort.

Boom, which is easily swamped by waves, provides only limited protection, something even politicians who have thundered for more to be installed will concede. It also requires constant maintenance, as squalls moving in from offshore regularly break the chains apart, and effective deployment, something officials at all levels say has been lacking.

“The boom has been a disaster from the beginning,” Mr. Nungesser said, citing improper training for workers laying it out, as well as their unfamiliarity with the area’s waterways.

But proper deployment also requires a thorough plan and a detailed map of effective locations, with precise measurements of passes and other waterways.

The southeast Louisiana contingency plan, which includes environmental sensitivity maps, had not been updated in seven years — a lifetime after intense coastal erosion and a series of [hurricanes](#) that have turned, by some estimates, nearly 500 square miles of wetlands into open water.

So after the spill, with no new plan forthcoming, state and parish officials gathered one Saturday night in an office tower in Baton Rouge, and drew up a new set of booming maps.

Such plans work best when they can be tested ahead of time. They also are dependent on certain kinds of boom.

But response crews have often had to make do with the kind of boom that was on hand, even when it was the wrong kind. And since everything was being concocted on the fly, “they hadn’t had a chance to validate the plan,” Captain Laferriere said.

“I’d fly out every day and notice the boom,” he said. “And it was failing.”

*William Yardley contributed reporting from Seattle and John Collins Rudolf from Grand Isle, La.*

