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Murky Waters

Just about everything we know about the disastrous gulf oil spill we could have learned from Google Earth: thousands of miles of the Gulf of Mexico covered in oil slick or sheen, some of it headed for the Florida coast; almost 46,000 square miles, an area about the size of Pennsylvania, closed to fishing; miles of Louisiana marshland under siege from heavy oil.

But there is far more that we don't know, either because the government has not extracted the information from BP or is not sharing it with the public.

Either way, this is a disservice to a nation with a strong public interest in knowing how bad this spill is. Each day seems to bring some alarming new disclosure. Even BP seems willing to concede that its 5,000-barrel-a-day estimate of the leak is much too small. Giant oil plumes mixed with seawater are reported to exist beneath the surface, but nobody in government seems to know how deep and broad they are and what fish species they may be damaging. If they know, they aren't saying.

Here's one thing we do know: Representative Edward Markey, a Democrat of Massachusetts, managed by the simple expedient of writing a letter to pry from BP a live feed of the oil gushing from the leak 5,000 feet below the surface. He showed it on Thursday, and scientists said the leak appeared much larger than advertised by BP. Mr. Markey's staff said that independent scientists had asked for the same footage but BP had denied it.

As for the administration, [The Times reported on Thursday](#) that while the Environmental Protection Agency has taken water samples near the shoreline, which so far show minimal damage, it has yet to release findings from deeper waters. Some scientists have complained that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has been slow to investigate the magnitude of the spill and the damage it is causing in those waters.

Sylvia Earle, the noted oceanographer and a former senior official at NOAA, said Wednesday on Capitol Hill that "it seems baffling that we don't know how much oil is being spilled" and where it is in the water column. Jane Lubchenco, an equally distinguished oceanographer who now

runs the agency, said she was devoting “all possible” resources to finding out. One would have expected more by now — one month and counting since the explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig.

At issue here are two things we want from the Obama administration: transparency and toughness. The public needs to know everything the administration knows, in real time. If the administration is being kept in the dark by BP, the answer is to get tough with BP.

The administration was a bit slow off the mark, but deserves great credit for its response to the spill. It also is dealing with a big and defensive company whose financial interest lies in minimizing the damage.

But the credibility of the federal government is on the line. Each day brings not only depressing environmental news but fresh evidence of past regulatory failures by one government agency or another. The Minerals Management Service, in particular, ignored basic environmental laws like the Marine Mammals Protection Act and its own rules to fast-track applications by BP and other companies to drill in the deepwater gulf.

President Obama is expected to appoint a commission to investigate the spill, including its causes and the regulatory lapses that preceded it. Right now, the Minerals Management Service and the Coast Guard are basically investigating themselves — an untenable situation. The new commission should include experts who do not work for either government or industry, whose cozy relationship over the years is partly responsible for this mess we are in.