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‘Controlled Burn’ Considered for Gulf Oil Spill

By LESLIE KAUFMAN

With a vast oil slick now within only 20 miles of the ecologically fragile Louisiana coastline, Coast Guard officials said they were considering a “controlled burn” of the petroleum on the surface of the Gulf of Mexico.

Rear Adm. Mary E. Landry, the federal on-scene coordinator for the spill, said such a burn might be conducted as soon as Wednesday.

A joint government and industry task force has been unable to stop crude oil from streaming out of a broken pipe attached to a well 5,000 feet below sea level. The leaks were found Saturday, days after an oil rig to which the pipe was attached exploded and sank in the gulf about 50 miles southeast of Venice, La. An estimated 42,000 gallons a day are now spilling into the Gulf of Mexico.

Officials said Tuesday that wind projections indicated that the oil would not reach land in the next three days, and it was unclear exactly where along the Gulf Coast it might arrive first.

“If some of the weather conditions continue, the Delta area is at risk,” said Charlie Henry, scientific support coordinator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Admiral Landry said a final decision had not been made yet about whether to burn the oil.

“We fully understand there are benefits and trade-offs,” she said.

But she also noted that with the spill moving toward land the impact on the shoreline had to be

considered. That part of Louisiana contains some 40 percent of the nation’s wetlands and is spawning grounds for countless fish and birds.

Controlled burns have been done and tested before, Admiral Landry said, and had been shown to be “effective in burning 50 to 95 percent of oil collected in a fire boom.” The downside, she said, was a “black plume” of smoke that would put soot and other particulates into the air.

The consideration of burning was raised as the spill seemed to enter a direr phase. Short-term fixes have been unsuccessful, and political reaction has intensified.

On Tuesday, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said they were expanding the government’s investigation of the explosion that caused the oil rig disaster. The inquiry will have subpoena power and will look into possible criminal or civil violations by the operators of the drilling rig, Transocean, a Swiss company, and related companies.

Administration officials also met Tuesday with top executives of BP, which was leasing the rig and is required by law to pay for the cleanup. Last fall, as the federal government was weighing tougher safety and environmental rules for drilling in the Gulf of Mexico, BP objected, saying its voluntary programs were successful.

BP engineers have not been able to activate a device known as a blowout preventer, a valve at the wellhead that was supposed to stop oil flow in an emergency and is the only short-term solution for capping the well.

Doug Suttles, the chief operating officer for exploration and production at BP, defended the company’s efforts, and said the cleanup was costing $6 million a day. He said engineers had not given up on engaging the valve and were exploring other possible fixes.

Mr. Suttles said that a plan to use a type of tent or dome to collect the oil was progressing and was two to four weeks from being operational. On Tuesday, the company received permits to drill a relief well, which would be started half a mile from the current well site. Crews plan to drill toward the current well and then inject it with heavy fluids and concrete to seal it. That solution is experimental at this depth, however, and is months away.

Coast Guard officials said they were not expecting landfall for the spill in the next three days.

But Doug Helton, the incident operations coordinator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s emergency response division, said winds would change Wednesday and start pushing the spill north and west toward the Mississippi Delta. “It is going to land eventually,” Mr. Helton said.

The prospect alarmed fisherman and ecologists along the Louisiana coast. Gov. Bobby Jindal requested that the Coast Guard set up protective booms around several wildlife refuges in the Delta.

Those delicate coastal rookeries and estuaries factor into the consideration for the surface burn. Such a burn would most likely ease the impact on wildlife.

The oceanic agency issued a guide to the burn that advised as follows:

“Based on our limited experience, birds and mammals are more capable of handling the risk of a local fire and temporary smoke plume than of handling the risk posed by a spreading oil slick. Birds flying in the plume can become disoriented, and could suffer toxic effects. This risk, however, is minimal when compared to oil coating and ingestion.”

Admiral Landry said that a burn would take place offshore where no one on land could see it.

A burn does not get rid of the oil entirely. It leaves waxy residue that can either be skimmed from the surface or sink to the bottom of the ocean.

John M. Broder contributed reporting from Washington.