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Transcript – Press Briefing by National Incident Commander Admiral Thad Allen

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Below is a transcript from today's teleconference press briefing by Admiral Thad Allen, National Incident Commander for the Deepwater Horizon/BP oil spill.
A downloadable audio file of the conference is available here.

August 5, 2010

11:00 a.m. CDT

Thad Allen: Good afternoon. I'd like to provide you a couple updates and then we'll take whatever questions you have and then go to the phones. We spent yesterday down in Houston with the government science team led by Secretary of Energy Chu, and his team talking with BP engineers regarding the decision of whether or not to go ahead and cement the well after we have completed the static kill – having filled it with mud 24 hours before that.

The decision was made last night. The well was at a proper condition where we could cement it. That would increase the integrity of the well as far as potential leak of hydrocarbons and would actually enhance our ability to do the bottom kill after that.

I signed an order last night to BP and about 8:30 Eastern Daylight Time this morning they started pumping cement into the well. And will do that throughout the day. When that is done they'll make sure they have all the cement in place where it needs to be. The big conversation yesterday really had to do with whether or not the drill pipe was still intact, and how that might impact the cementing plan.

We pretty much came to a consensus on that. So today's effort into tomorrow will be to finish cementing off the well from the top down.

Let me state, and I have stated this several times, that this is not the end. But it will virtually assure us that there will be no chance of oil leaking into the environment. We will then proceed to finish the relief well. The relief well is currently four-and-a-half feet away from the Macondo well, and about 100 to 110 feet above the point where they would enter the annulus.

The end of the casing pipe has been sealed with a cement shoe. They have a drill pipe down and they are ready to drill through that cement shoe and continue – finish out the relief well. And that will happen after the cement has been cured for a certain amount of time and will proceed.

Elsewhere in the gulf we are starting to take a look at the large vessels offshore, the skimming vessels, all we need to do is kind of collapse those back in closer to shore. We've started focusing on the areas that we already know had impacts. These are places like Barataria Bay, the Chandeleur Islands, Breton Sound, Mississippi Sound, the Barrier Islands of Mississippi, and continues to clean up back over towards Mobile and the Florida Panhandle.

We will continue to focus our recovery efforts. I will say once again to the people in the Gulf, that we are committed to finishing this cleanup, holding BP accountable. And we will continue to do that. So but our focus will become more locally focused, looking at the shoreline, and making sure the oil marshes, the beaches, and so forth are properly attended to. To that end we will remain and get the job.

With that I'd be glad to take questions.

Male: On the figures that came out yesterday, Admiral(inaudible).

Male: (Inaudible) gallons got out. How did you arrive at those figures, including the ones that said twenty-six percent of it remains unrecovered (inaudible).

Thad Allen: There's been a lot of talk about numbers moving forward. Let me just say at the outset. If you don't have a number, that's a bad thing, when you do have a number that's a bad thing. Because they always have to be explained, or why did you arrive at that conclusion? I think we need to walk through the process here.

This really goes back to flow rate. And we know from the start there have been issues about flow rate as we walk through the 1,000, 5,000, 12,000 to 25,000, 25,000 to 60,000. We have gotten to a point now where based on a lot of input from the scientific community under the direction of Marcia McNutt. We've been able to focus in and get what we think is a fairly reliable estimate on flow rate. And you know that's 53,000 barrels a day plus or minus 10 percent.

And we know earlier in the spill it's probably over 60, and that's probably dropped as the reservoir was completed. OK once you have a flow rate that's not a range anymore, within a reasonable error rate, which is 10 percent plus or minus, the logical extension is, how much oil? And once you establish how much oil which is a little below you know so the five million barrels that we've publicized, the question is, where is the oil?

Well we know certain things happened. We know a certain amount was produced that's measurable. You know a certain amount was skimmed. That's measurable. We know a certain amount was burned. That's measurable.

We also know based on tests and records and data that you have a certain amount of effectiveness with dispersants. And we know a certain amount evaporates. And a certain amount is biodegraded. If you go back to our basic algebra, we all tried to struggle through back in school, you solve for X, that's what's left.
Male: And the liability (inaudible) 10 percent flow rate for example, combined with the (inaudible) …

Thad Allen: I …

Male: (inaudible) error is greater than the …

Thad Allen: I would say yes and no. We know to a virtual certainty how much was produced. In other words, some of the numbers are absolute. OK. And it's a model. Models are an approximation of reality and therefore they are never perfect. But I think it's a point-of-departure to try to have the discussion and try and understand what actually happened, what are the implications long-term. Because we still have to deal with natural resource damage assessment and so forth.

So I will be the first to admit, and I wasn't the scientists who were taking part in this. I am a user of this. That you can argue that the margin's about you know is this a proper model or not? The question is, do we think we know what happened? Do we have a starting point to have the discussion? And I think Jane Lubcheno, Marcia McNutt, would all say we have better information, we can refine this.

But we've slowly closed in on flow rate. And flow rate leads us to the total amount. And the total amount we know certain things happen. And there are certain things we can't quantify right now. And right now what we can quantify either based on a certainty or some model that allows us to do an estimation, is 26 percent.

Male: Do you think these numbers will drift then as time goes forward?

Thad Allen: I think if we get more information I think its incumbent on us to take a look at it. I think everybody would tell you that. Yes.

Female: How long will the cement process last? Including the time it takes to cure the cement and (Inaudible).

Thad Allen: Well, the top kill portion including the cement, I think we'll know in the next 24 hours. After that though I would say we're going to have to start making preparations to drill through cement shoe at the bottom of the casing pipe and the relief well and drill that last 100 feet. And that will be done in very small increments because they're going to drill, pull out, put a ranging tool in. See how far they are away horizontally from the casing. And that could take about five to seven days after we're ready to move ahead to move ahead on it.

They don't want to do anything in the relief well while they're cementing because they're so close together.

Female: And how long will it (inaudible)?

Thad Allen: Well it doesn’t have to cure all the way from them to start. I think we're – probably talking 24 to 36 hours. And we'll get the exact numbers on that for you. If you would write that down and we'll get back to you.

Male: I have a follow-up. Does your top kill speed up the ultimate completion of the bottom kill? Like build a trap for (inaudible)?

Thad Allen: It could. It could. Yes. Well the way I have described this in the past, to really kill the well it's like closing out hollow tree rings. Maybe a lousy analogy, but I think it works. You start with the annulus, which is the outer ring. And then you go in and you kill that with mud and then cement. And you let the

cement harden. You go in and you drill in again to the smaller trunk of the tree, if you will, in this case it's the casing.

Absent of what we've done in top kill, the assumption is you would have to go in, pump mud and cement into the annulus. But that hardens. So you've got that locked down. And you will come in and drill again into the casing. Once we get in there we will know how much of an effect we've had with the mud and the cement from the top. That could shorten and make more simpler the bottom kill. That was one of the reasons to do it, and also reduce the risk of the bottom kill. Exactly.

No more questions, operator, we're ready to go to the phones.

(Vivian Kuo): Hi there, Admiral. Just to follow up on that last question. So since you guys are starting to fill the inner casing with cement, are you going to try and even after you pierce the annulus, are you going to go into the casing again during the bottom kill?

Thad Allen: I think it depends on what we find in the annulus. What we want them to exhaust is everywhere there might be hydrocarbons and make sure any chance that oil could go to the surface that we have first put mud and then cemented it.

So I will know a little bit more. This is kind of a sequential event. We learn more about the well through the injection test, putting the mud into the cement. And we'll know more when the cementing job is done. And that will inform what we think we have to do for the bottom kill. But the initial thing will be to penetrate the annulus, and first of all check for the presence of hydrocarbons, and then make an assessment then on what we know after we've put the mud in and cemented that whether or not we'll need to go into the casing.

So it will be a probably a two-step decision process.

Clifford Krauss: Thank you, Admiral. I think we have gone through this several times. But I just want to make sure. Are you saying that there will definitely be two cement jobs with the top kill, and then later on? Or now that we have the top – we have the cement job with top kill, it is possible we will not have a second cement job with the bottom kill?

Thad Allen: This well will not be killed until we do the bottom kill, and do whatever needs to be done once we understand the condition of the annulus moving forward. It will most likely be mud and cement from the bottom.

I have stated over and over again, let me be perfectly clear. I am the National Incident Commander. I issue the orders. This will not be done until we complete the bottom kill.

Dan Vergano: Thanks, Admiral. I am wondering, since the static kill worked so quickly from the top and compared to some of the estimates of time, eight hours, I think the static condition. Does that mean your expectation is as this would – this top kill cement would only reach the central pipe, and that the annulus and the inner casing haven't been affected by the top kill and so you'd have to do the cement to reach that? Or can you draw the picture a little better for me?

Thad Allen: Well it's almost like a mystery you're trying to unravel, and it has to do with what's the condition of the casing pipe is, the annulus and the drill pipe itself. I think we've pretty much come to the conclusion that we don't have a breach of the casing or the wellbore itself. And we learned that from the injection test and what we learned from the top kill.

The question is, what is the path of the mud and the cement from the bottom of the reservoir. How is that being filled? And what will be remained to be done once that is completed. And we're still trying to understand that right now. And I think there is a question about whether or not hydrocarbons came up the annulus or the pipe.

There is a question of the mud and the cement going down. Where does that actually go? And the term they use is communication. What is the path of communication or fluids being forced down through the well? And that was the discussion yesterday before we started the cementing in relation to where the pipe was in the casing.

And I think there will be another discussion after the cementing is done about what that means in terms of how we're going to intercept the well at the relief well and intercept the annulus. Was that responsive?
Jim Polson: Yes, Admiral, just a little bit of a follow-up to that. Kent Wells' illustrations had basically shown that what BP intended to do was to run cement all the way down to the bottom of the well and actually start filling up any voids, any spaces, any spots in the reservoir with it. Is that the intent of the job that's going on now to essentially fill the well as best you can from top to bottom?

Thad Allen: Well they'll try and do as much as you can with the static kill and the cementing job that's going on right now. But we won't have 100 percent guarantee they have been able to accomplish that unless we go in through the bottom. And so what Kent said is accurate. And there shouldn't be any inference there's daylight between us on this because they need to do as much as they can. But we still need to come in from the bottom.

(Paula Dittrick): Yes. Thank you, Admiral for taking my call. I was wondering if on the flow rate estimates, if you could talk about it, if that's fluids total, or if that's just oil that we're talking about. Because I understand that some water was coming up with the oil.

Thad Allen: Well that's a great question. In fact, it's more than that. That flow contains oil, it contains natural gas, it contains water, and actually it contains sediment as well. And one of the challenges we had was starting with two-dimensional video, and moving forward to try to get greater clarity on what constitutes a flow rate was trying to understand what constituted that column of material that was coming out.

And in addition to it being comprised of natural gas, water, oil, and sediment, there is a phasing to it. And it depends on how the reservoir is made up, and how much gas comes forward in relation to the oil that's in the well. And it comes up in different ratios. And they actually found some phasing. And over a certain period of time you would have a – say a larger bubble of gas, a flow of oil with lesser gas and then gas again. And they actually were able to establish that.

So if you're trying to establish the flow rate you have to understand not only the constituent parts of the flow that's coming up, but the phasing, what you're seeing, when you're seeing it, and what's the periodicity of that so you can come up with the volume metric estimate. And that's what they did as they slowly got to high-resolution video related to being able to estimate the cross section.

That was also informed by some acoustical testing that was done by the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute. And you put that together with what they call a mass balance team that was looking at the oil that was actually on the surface, and what that would indicate in terms of flow rate to cause that amount of oil to be out there.

To do that we actually used some very sophisticated censors from NASA that were actually able to look at reflectivity of the oil versus the water, and actually be able to come up with an estimate on the thickness of the oil.

All of that slowly came together. It was slowly refined. Looked at several times. And then we add to that the pressure readings we were able to take when we put the cappings back on, and how those pressures are related to potential flow. All that are the – are the precursors that came together to produce the flow rate. Is that responsive?

Kasia Klimasimska: Hi. Thanks a lot for taking my question. I guess the reports are as (last date). So I would ask will drilling the relief well starts at some point around August 8th, is this correct? And then the – when is the earliest date that the interception could happen?

Thad Allen: Well it will start as soon as we are finished with the cementing process and we have enough cure on the cement where we don't think there'll be an interaction between the cementing of the Macondo well and the relief well which is as I said is only four-and-a-half feet away from it horizontally right now. We want to make sure there is no passing of pressures or – and we keep the relief well intact. That's the reason the casing was run to the cement shoe that's got it plugged at the end, and we're circulating fluids to keep it clean. Once we're sure we've got the go-ahead we will drill through the cement shoe at the bottom of the casing, then commence to drill the extra 100 feet down that will bring us to the well.

Kristin Hays: Yes, good morning, Admiral. I am going to follow-up on that. So when do you think the relief well drilling will begin? And actually, when will you be able to declare this well dead in terms of …
Thad Allen: I will declare this well dead once we have intercepted the annulus and we've assessed how much mud or cement we need to do from the bottom that will finally kill this well. It won't be until then that I would do that. Now, we will have created a significant milestone, and made a major step forward probably by tomorrow when the cementing is done.

I think we can all breathe a little easier regarding the potential that we'll have oil in the Gulf ever again. But we need to ensure the people of the Gulf and the people of the United States that this thing is properly finished. And that will be through the bottom. Now how long it takes depends on when the cementing is done. When the cementing is done and they start drilling, they're going to have to drill, look through all the drill pipe, use the ranging tool.

And that would give you about five to seven days after they commence drilling through the shoe that we will be done with that first step, which is intercepting the annulus and then making a determination of how much mud and cement needs to be pumped in. If we have to do a second round to drill into the casing, add another five to seven days.

Thad Allen: Thank you very much.

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