

**The Honorable Janet Napolitano**  
**Secretary**  
**United States Department of Homeland Security**

**Testimony before the**  
**United States Senate**  
**Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs**

**on**  
**“Gulf Coast Catastrophe: Assessing the Nation’s Response to the Deepwater**  
**Horizon Oil Spill”**

**May 17, 2010**

Chairman Lieberman, Senator Collins, and members of the Committee: Thank you for this opportunity to testify about the Department of Homeland Security's role in the Administration's response to the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Since day one, the Administration has engaged in an all-hands-on-deck response to this event — and DHS has played a significant role. We planned for a worst-case scenario from the moment the explosion occurred and now, almost four weeks later, we are continuing to sustain a strong and effective response. Every step of the way, the Administration has closely coordinated its efforts with the states and local communities affected by the spill.

As of this writing on May 14<sup>1</sup>, there are more than 17,000 personnel at the federal, state and local level and thousands of trained volunteers responding to protect the shoreline and wildlife. More than 550 vessels have been deployed across the Gulf region, including skimmers, tugs, barges, and recovery vessels — in addition to dozens of aircraft, remotely operated vehicles, and multiple mobile offshore drilling units. More than 1.2 million feet of containment boom have been deployed, and we have deployed more than a half million gallons of dispersants in addition to using controlled burns and skimming techniques to contain the oil slick, recovering more than 5 million gallons of an oil-water mix. We have established 14 staging areas across the Gulf Coast states and three regional command centers. The Department of Defense has approved the activation of up to 17,500 National Guard troops and more than 1,300 are deployed.

While this spill is still continuing, DHS and all of our partners throughout the federal government will continue to do everything in our power to ensure that BP stops the leaks, contains the spill, and mitigates the spill's impact on the environment, the economy, and public health.

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<sup>1</sup> All statistics in this statement are as of Friday, May 14.

Today, I would like to offer the Committee a brief overview of DHS' response, as part of the coordinated, government-wide effort and how we plan to address the challenges in the days and weeks ahead.

### **DHS Response Since Day One**

At 10:30 p.m. on Tuesday, April 20, the Coast Guard received notification of an explosion on the Mobile Offshore Drilling Unit Deepwater Horizon. The President was alerted and began actively monitoring the situation, and a large-scale search-and-rescue operation began out of concern for the 126 people on the rig at the time of the explosion. Two Coast Guard cutters and aircraft were deployed and arrived on the scene as the first response vessels and the Coast Guard stood up a command center to address environmental impacts and begin coordinating with state and local governments. Search-and-rescue operations continued through Friday, April 23 – 115 crew members were accounted for the morning after the explosion and 11 crew members remain missing.

On Wednesday, April 21, Coast Guard Rear Admiral Mary Landry was named the Federal On-Scene Coordinator; the Regional Response Team, which allows federal, state, and local representatives to exchange information and coordinate technical advice, equipment, or manpower to assist with a response, was activated; and an interagency investigation into the incidents was launched. On the morning of Thursday, April 22, the oil rig sank, with 700,000 gallons of diesel fuel on board. This prompted the immediate activation of the National Response Team (NRT) – which includes leadership from across the federal government, including the White House, DHS, the U.S. Coast Guard, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Departments of Defense, Commerce, and Interior, among others, led by the Secretary of

Homeland Security as the principal federal official responsible for coordinating the federal response. That same day, President Obama convened a principals meeting about the event. At this time, there were no apparent oil leaks, but 100,000 gallons of dispersants were prepositioned. We also initiated intergovernmental calls to provide updates on the situation to potentially affected communities along the Gulf Coast.

On Friday, April 23, the sunken rig was found on the ocean floor, with an oil sheen estimated at 8,400 gallons nearby. No oil leak was apparent, but the NRT convened in order to plan ahead in case the situation deteriorated – continuing to pre-position response assets in preparation for a worst case scenario

The next day, Saturday, April 24, BP found the first two leaks and alerted the federal government. The first three equipment staging locations were quickly stood up across the Gulf Coast, and additional personnel and vessels were deployed to the area. We began to deploy boom the next day. On Wednesday, April 28, the first controlled burn operation was conducted, and was successful. Controlled burning is a strategy designed to minimize environmental risks by removing large quantities of oil, concentrated and collected in fire boom, in the Gulf of Mexico. Later that day, BP discovered an additional leak from the oil well. The President was notified, and we further bolstered our response while directing BP to leverage all additional resources to stop the leaking oil.

On Thursday, April 29, I designated the events a Spill of National Significance, which built on the operational and policy coordination already underway from the beginning of this response and enabled us to appoint a National Incident Commander to coordinate resources and communication at the national level. BP established a toll-free hotline for claims on April 30, while the Coast Guard set up a process to resolve any claims issues. The President dispatched

several Cabinet officials, including myself, to the Gulf Coast to inspect response operations. On May 1, we announced that Admiral Thad Allen, the outgoing Commandant of the Coast Guard, would serve as the National Incident Commander, continuing to lead and coordinate ongoing federal actions to mitigate the oil spill. On May 2, the President traveled to the Gulf to examine response activities. Since then, a number of Cabinet members, including myself, have traveled to the Gulf Coast many times to oversee ongoing response activities.

### **Current Response**

Undersea, at the surface, and at the shoreline, we are continuing our response operations with the goal of reducing, mitigating, removing, and disposing of the spilled oil. Our priorities are 1) stopping the leaks; 2) reducing the spread of oil; 3) protecting the shoreline; and 4) clean-up and recovery. The Coast Guard, in conjunction with EPA and other federal agencies, has conducted six Spill of National Significance Exercises since 1994 that have provided valuable experience for this response.

#### *Stopping the Leaks*

The Administration's first priority has been overseeing BP's efforts to stop the leaks. Frankly, the federal government has limited capability and expertise in responding to wellhead incidents on the seafloor. Nonetheless, the federal government has mobilized scientists and industry experts to collaborate with BP to identify and execute the best strategies for sealing the well, and the President has tasked the Department of Energy to participate in providing any possible expertise on that front. Ultimately, the permanent solution to stop this leaking is to drill a relief well, which will relieve pressure and permanently stop the flow of oil. BP began drilling

this well two weeks ago and, absent special circumstances, anticipates this will be a 90-day process. BP also continues to pursue other possible methods to seal the well. These include clogging the blowout preventer with selected materials in a technique known as a “junk shot;” a method known as “top kill,” where a piece of equipment sitting at the top of the wellhead is reconfigured so that heavy fluids can be pumped into the well and stop the flow of oil outward; and improving past attempts to collect the flow of oil with a containment dome, the latest iteration of which is often called a “top hat.”

### *Reducing the Spread of Oil and Protecting the Shoreline*

We continue surface and shoreline response operations to reduce, mitigate, remove, and dispose of the spilled oil. These include burning oil on the water’s surface, blocking the oil’s progress toward shore with boom, mechanically removing oil by skimming it from the surface, and applying chemical dispersants.

These mitigation efforts are run out of a Unified Area Command in Robert, La. We have also stood up three Incident Command Posts in Mobile, Ala., Houma, La., and St. Petersburg, Fla., beneath the Unified Area Command. In addition, we have established 14 staging locations in strategic locations in the Gulf Coast states that could be affected by this spill, from where equipment such as boom is deployed. This method of organization has supplied a clear structure for the response.

Each of the command posts includes state and local government partners, and liaison officers are embedded in each state’s emergency operations center. This structure helps us to continue to coordinate closely with state and local governments, as we have done since the beginning of this spill. This command structure also allows for close coordination across federal

agencies. Members of the Cabinet continue to be extensively involved in overseeing the response, and as I mentioned, several of us have traveled to the Unified Area Command, the Incident Command Posts, and the staging locations since they were set up.

We are also dedicating resources to the clean-up of locations where oil from this spill makes landfall. As of this writing, there have been several reports of tar balls from the spill washing onto beaches. Once tar balls make landfall, shoreline cleanup assessment teams evaluate the situation to determine how best to remove them, which is done either by hand with protective gloves, or with beach cleaning machinery. An analysis of the tar balls may also occur to determine whether they did, in fact, originate from the BP spill. The U.S. Coast Guard has dedicated a toll-free line to take reports of new tar balls from residents. Thousands of volunteers have also been trained to potentially help in beach clean-up.

We have been conducting activities to mitigate the impact of the spill for weeks now, and we continue to dedicate more resources to this effort as the spill continues. As of last week, all shipping channels and ports remain open in the Gulf Coast region and there are no reported delays or closures to shipping.

#### *Recovery – Claims Processing*

As a responsible party for these leaks, BP is legally charged with sealing the leaks, as well as paying for the cost of the response and damages that result from the spill. BP has acknowledged these responsibilities, and we will hold them accountable while continuing to deploy every available resource to assist in stopping the leaks and containing the damage. BP has established a toll-free claims hotline to receive and process claims of economic market damages, property damage, and personal injury. As of May 14, BP reported that it had opened nearly

11,000 claims, disbursed over \$6.6 million, and has not yet denied a claim. The Administration continues to closely monitor BP's claims process and the Coast Guard has a website and toll-free number for claims resolution. These resources are available to help claimants connect with the BP processing system, and to assist them in the event that they encounter difficulties adjudicating their claims with a responsible party. We have also assigned senior leadership with experience in resolving Katrina claims to oversee this process to ensure claims by impacted individuals and communities are addressed quickly and fairly. Further, the National Incident Command (NIC) is taking the lead in coordinating the human service and small business response effort. The NIC has tasked FEMA with the role of coordinating the delivery of benefits.

Last week, the President sent Congress a legislative proposal that would help individuals manage the claims process and enable the federal government to speed assistance in the event that the spill gets worse and if the responsible parties are not paying claims to affected individuals quickly and fairly. The legislation provides states with additional help to provide one-stop services for those affected by the oil spill, including assistance in filing claims with BP and seeking other assistance that may be available, such as Small Business Administration Disaster Loans. The Administration's proposal enables the President to trigger and mobilize, in partnership with states, new forms of assistance – such as Unemployment and Nutrition Aid – if the claims process established by the Oil Pollution Act is not sufficient to meet the needs of affected individuals. It also enables the government to recoup the expenses of providing these services from the responsible parties.

### *Investigation*

Together with the Department of the Interior (DOI), we are conducting an interagency



investigation into the causes of the explosion and spill, and we held the first formal public proceedings of that investigation last week. In addition, DHS is working along with Interior and the Department of Justice to ensure that all records and evidence that may be relevant to the ongoing investigation to identify the cause of the well blowout and any future litigation are preserved, including monitoring the removal of equipment and debris from the spill site. In the interest of transparency, we have established a website for sharing information on the investigation with the public at [www.deepwaterinvestigation.com](http://www.deepwaterinvestigation.com).

### **Conclusion**

Looking ahead, the Administration will continue the strong response we have sustained since April 20, mobilizing every available resource to protect the environment, the economy, and public health in the Gulf region. Individuals, communities, businesses have suffered as a result of this spill. DHS and this Administration have responded – and will continue to respond – to this unprecedented and unique problem with all hands on deck.

Chairman Lieberman, Senator Collins, and members of the Committee: Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer your questions.