

Claims of oil spill removal face scepticism as BP plugs leak

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BP's "static kill" operation appears to have succeeded in plugging its leaking well.

However, some scientists are sceptical of a US government report concluding that most of the spilt oil is gone and poses little threat to the Gulf of Mexico.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the "vast majority" of the 4.9 million barrels released into the gulf has evaporated "or been burned, skimmed and recovered from the wellhead, or dispersed".

"It's an estimate," Ronald Kendall, director of the Institute of Environmental and Human Health at Texas Tech University, told a congressional hearing yesterday. "Even if it's true, there are still 50 to 60 million gallons that are still out there. It's too early to draw the conclusion that the coast is clear, but there are species there that will tell us."

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The White House tried to use the report to boost confidence that the disaster that killed 11 workers, fouled the gulf, killed wildlife and disrupted economies from Texas to Florida, was now in the past.

Marine conservationist Rick Steiner, a retired University of Alaska scientist, said: "Let's look at this another way: that there's some 50 per cent of the oil left. It's still there in the environment."

In one upside, an expert on marine oil pollution says the spill could lead to an increase in fish stocks because of the restrictions on fishing in the area.

Martin Preston, senior lecturer in ocean sciences at the University of Liverpool, northwest England, said the long-term impact remained unclear, in particular on the level of damage to fish larvae that were at a critical stage of their reproduction cycle at the time of the oil rig explosion on April 20.

But Dr Preston said the combined impact of the fishing ban and the oil spill could be positive for some fish populations.

"The oil may have killed fewer fish than the fishermen would have done," he said.

"Stocks may look better next year, but we won't know until then . . . Dead fish float, and there have been no reports of large numbers of dead fish floating around."

AP, The Times

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