

Oil Spill Update: Ban Might Help Fisheries Recover; Hurricane Predictions; Dolphins and Sea Turtles; Oil Plume Controversy

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A pelican swims in a make-shift pool after being cleaned of oil at the Clean Gulf Associates Mobile Wildlife Rehabilitation Station. Photo: US Navy

Here's a roundup of the latest oil spill news, from the mysterious underwater oil plumes, to BP's recovery advances, to the slick's impact on sea turtles, dolphins, and birds.

Fishing ban might help fisheries recover, expert says

Since May 2, NOAA has [halted all commercial and recreational fishing](#) [1] in oil spill-affected waters. The closure area now measures 24,241 square miles, or about 10 percent of the Gulf of Mexico exclusive economic zone. While experts are concerned about marine animals swimming through the toxic slick, marine biologist Daniel Pauly says there just might be an up side to the fishing ban.

From [On Earth](#) [2]:

The Gulf has just been declared a large marine protected area as a result of the spill—no fishing! It is possible that a massive rebound of the fish population will occur because we are not fishing them. If the fishing is discontinued for a month or two, or a season, we may see massive changes in the Gulf.

Hurricanes and oil spill don't mix

The start of hurricane season—June 1—is just around the corner. While the government won't release its hurricane forecast for 2010 Atlantic hurricane season until Thursday, other experts have already speculated that we'll see anywhere between eight and 18 named storms this year. How hurricanes might affect the oil spill area is largely unknown, but experts are concerned.

From [ClimateWire](#) [3] (via [The New York Times](#)):

Several scientists are worried that a hurricane could drive oil inland, soiling beaches and wetlands and pushing polluted water up river estuaries.

"My 'oh, no' thought is that a hurricane would pick up that oil and move it, along with salt, up into interior regions of the state that I am convinced the oil will not reach otherwise," said Robert Twilley, an oceanographer at Louisiana State University. "The bottom line is, how much oil are we going to get into our wetlands? We don't know," he said. "This thing is gushing out in these huge numbers."



Dr. Erica Miller, a member of the Louisiana State Wildlife Response Team, cleans an oiled pelican at the Clean Gulf Associates Mobile Wildlife Rehabilitation Station on Ft. Jackson in Plaquemines Parish, La., on May 15. Photo: US Navy

Wildlife Update

In previous oil spills, the toll on wildlife has been dramatic—and obvious. In this instance, both because of the distance of the rig explosion from shore and the use of dispersants to break up oil, there have been relatively few oiled birds.

Dead dolphins and sea turtles have been washing up on shore in the Gulf though none have been visibly oiled, and officials haven't determined whether any of them are victims of the spill.

From [Reuters](#) [4]:

This is a time of year when dead or debilitated turtles would normally begin to show up with greater frequency, but the 156 found since April 30 along the coasts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida "are in higher numbers than you would expect," Ziccardi said. None of the animals had obvious signs of oil contamination. But, because of their proximity to the spill, they are being treated as possible victims of the crude oil that has been gushing from the ruptured wellhead since April 20, he said.

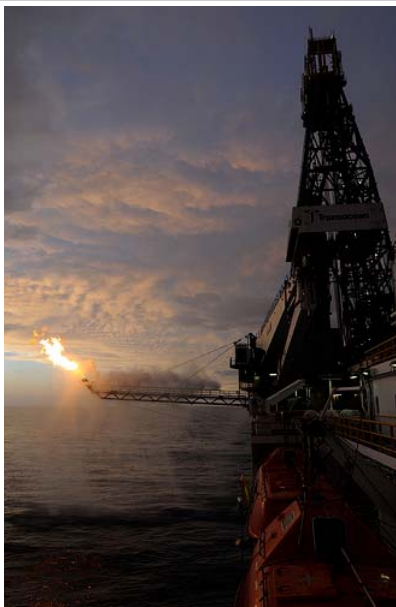
The 12 confirmed dead dolphin strandings along the same four Gulf Coast states, Ziccardi said, were "more or less in line" with what would normally be found for the same period of time without an oil spill.

Underwater oil plume controversy

On Sunday, there were reports that scientists aboard Pelican, a research vessel recording data and taking water samples of the oil slick, discovered huge oil plumes more than 2,000 feet below the surface near the 5,000-foot-deep broken pipe that's spewing crude into the ocean. Marine scientist Vernon Asper described to [NPR](#) [5] three plumes—which consume oxygen, harming marine life—that are "roughly 10 or 15 miles long" and "more than 100 meters thick."

But yesterday Jane Lubchenco, head of NOAA, said that it's too early to tell whether the plumes really do consist of oil. "Media reports related to the research work conducted aboard the R/V Pelican included information that was misleading, premature and, in some cases, inaccurate," said Lubchenco in a [press release](#) [6]. "No definitive conclusions have been reached by this research team about the composition of the undersea layers they discovered. Characterization of these layers will require analysis of samples and calibration of key instruments. The hypothesis that the layers consist of oil remains to be verified."

The *Los Angeles Times* has more on the [controversy](#) [7].



Gas from the damaged Deepwater Horizon wellhead is burned by the drillship Discoverer Enterprise May 16, 2010, in a process known as flaring.

BP's recovery efforts

On Sunday, BP announced that it succeeded in its second try to insert a new tube into the broken pipe on the sea floor that oil has been streaming out of for nearly a month. The company estimates that the riser insertion tube tool containment system is collecting and carrying about 2,000 barrels a day of oil to flow up 5,000 feet to the drill ship Discoverer Enterprise. BP is storing the oil it recovers on the ship, and burning off the gas.

The company continues to drill two relief wells (one started on May 2, the other on May 16), which will take about three months each to complete. BP is also working to develop a "top kill" operation. Here's how that's expected to work:

Heavy drilling fluids are injected into the well to stem the flow of oil and gas, followed by cement to seal the well. Most of the equipment is on site and preparations continue for this operation, with a view to deployment in the next week or so. Options have also been developed to potentially combine this with the injection under pressure of a variety of materials into the BOP to seal off upward flow.

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- [1] http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/deepwater_horizon_oil_spill.htm
- [2] <http://www.onearth.org/article/gulf-oil-spill-an-opportunity-for-conservation>
- [3] <http://www.nytimes.com/cwire/2010/05/17/17climatewire-researchers-ponder-a-hurricane-hitting-the-o-86257.html>
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