

BP internal investigation into Gulf oil spill mostly points finger at others

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BP on Wednesday released the results of its internal investigation into the fatal blowout of the Macondo oil well, attributing the largest oil spill in U.S. history to eight missteps -- most of which it pins on contractors.

The global oil giant takes significant responsibility for only one of the eight errors it highlights. Five of the key issues BP identifies took place after the Macondo oil well had already started to blow April 20. The report pays far more attention to how workers for Transocean, the owner of the Deepwater Horizon rig, reacted to a deadly kick of natural gas than it does to the BP well design that many believe failed to keep the hydrocarbons out of the hole in the first place.

"It's like a drunk driver who T-bones another car and two occupants die, and when he's sober enough to talk he says the paramedics should have gotten there earlier and then they could have saved those people," said Keith Jones of Baton Rouge, whose son Gordon Jones was among two mud men from contractor M-I SWACO who were killed in the explosions.

The report serves as a blueprint of the corporation's legal defense in what is expected to be protracted civil litigation, and was immediately trashed by BP's contractors and independent watchdogs. In the select instances where the report is critical of BP's actions, it quickly dismisses most of those findings as not important to the causes of the disaster.

"This is a self-serving report that attempts to conceal the critical factor that set the stage for the Macondo incident: BP's fatally flawed well design," said Transocean spokesman Lou Colasuonno. "In both its design and construction, BP made a series of cost-saving decisions that increased risk - in some cases, severely."

The cement contractor, Halliburton, said the report was beset by "substantial omissions and inaccuracies." Spokeswoman Cathy Mann said the company stood by its cementing work and that design deficiencies were BP's responsibility.

Because Wednesday's report was compiled by BP safety chief Mark Bly and a team of 50 investigators mostly from within BP, the 193-page report isn't likely to heavily influence federal investigators from the Coast Guard, the Interior Department and the Department of Justice who are trying to determine the cause of the tragedy.

U.S. Rep. Ed Markey, D-Mass., a principal BP critic in Congress during the disaster, scoffed at the company's attempts at neutrality.

"BP is happy to slice up blame, as long as they get the smallest piece," Markey said.

Still, the report offers some useful new analysis of what went wrong April 20, as well as 25 suggestions for how the oil and gas industry can avoid similar incidents in the future, mostly through tighter controls on contractors.

Because BP touted the report as "independent" and "walled off" from the rest of the company, it was expected to include some criticisms of the BP's own actions. In one instance, the report points a finger at the two company men on board the rig, Donald Vidrine and Robert Kaluza, but doesn't actually mention their names.

It placed less crucial blame on unnamed members of its engineering and operations team in Houston. That team was led by John Guide, included engineers Gregg Walz, Mark Hafle, Brian Morel and Brett Cocales, and also involved drilling manager David Sims.

The report stands in stark contrast to the conclusions drawn by independent engineering experts, federal investigators and news reporters based on reviews of available evidence. Those generally found that BP engineers and supervisors chose dubious designs for the well, skipped a crucial test that could have warned them of cementing problems and then misinterpreted the results of a final pressure test before deciding to remove a final barrier against gas flowing up to the rig.

The BP report mentions all of those shortcomings, but only emphasizes BP's errors in misinterpreting the final pressure test. It notes that BP didn't follow Halliburton's recommendation to better stabilize the well's metal linings, and it even says that BP's engineering team "erroneously" concluded that safety devices sent to the rig were the wrong type. But in the end, the BP report concludes those weren't critical errors.

The BP report also criticizes company supervisors for failing to use a "proven cement evaluation technique," a reference to the cement bond log that the company was prepared to do, but decided to skip. Even though that test could have alerted them to cement integrity problems, the BP says little more about it in the report, and doesn't count it among the critical missteps.

Rather, BP takes the position that the gas that caused the explosions "probably" seeped into the very center of the well at the bottom, and not up through a side space. This theory allows BP to put more blame on Halliburton's cement job and less focus on the company's decision to build the well with fewer barriers to gas flow.

Notably, three of the report's major findings point a finger squarely at the men who died in the accident, even though details about their efforts to control the well are nearly impossible to piece together without their description of events. The BP report states that the rig crew took "no apparent well control actions ... until hydrocarbons were in the riser." It provides no further evidence of that.

"Pointing the finger at rig workers who are no longer here is less than admirable," Transocean's Colasuonno said.

But at a Washington press briefing on the report, the leaders of the BP investigative team said they were not blaming the men who lost their lives.

"We can't put ourselves into the minds of the people that were there," Bly said. "What we've tried to do is reconstruct what we believe happened using this real-time data, the things that in a normal set of circumstances would have been observable, but at the same time we know that there were other things that were under way."

Jim Weatherbee, a former NASA shuttle astronaut who participated in the BP investigation, said the crew clearly made "assessments and took actions that made sense to them at the time, given incomplete information that they may have had at the time." The question, going forward, is to determine what systems failed to provide them critical information, he said.

The BP report sheds little light on why the blowout preventer failed to cut through drill pipe and shut off the well. It says one of two control pods on the five-story stack of shut-off valves had a nearly dead battery, something Transocean disputes. BP also takes the position that there was only one drill pipe in the mechanism during the accident. A second pipe was found in a section just above the BOP stack, raising the specter of two pipes fouling up the BOP, but BP concludes that was due to a breaking of the pipe after the accident.