

BP internal investigation report leaves some things unsaid

By David S. Hilzenrath, WASHINGTON POST

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Delivering the results of BP's internal oil spill investigation last week, chief investigator Mark Bly said he found no sign that the company cut corners to save money.

"My view is that we didn't see any indications that support that," Bly said.

But BP's voluminous report on the causes of the April 20 explosion in the Gulf of Mexico on the Deepwater Horizon rig does not include information brought to light in other investigations highlighting actions that might save time or money.

One example involves BP's use of a gooey chemical mixture in the well during a pivotal pressure test that preceded the blowout.

The report says that the mixture could have clogged a line involved in the test, masking the fact that hydrocarbons were flowing into the well.

The material that went into the mixture - more than 400 barrels of products called Form-A-Set and Form-A-Squeeze - was left over on the rig after the well drilling. The material was designed to plug leaks, such as cracks in rock formations.

Under environmental protection standards, if BP used the leftover material in the well, it could then dump the product directly into the gulf instead of transporting it to shore for disposal as hazardous waste, Leo Lindner, a drilling fluid specialist for contractor M-I SWACO, testified at a federal hearing in July.

During the April 20 pressure test, BP used it as a "spacer" to separate seawater from dense drilling fluid called "mud" in a column of fluids pumped into the well.

"They didn't want to have to dispose of them," Lindner said of the leftover Form-A-Set and Form-A-Squeeze.

The BP report does not discuss the disposal advantage that Lindner described. The report said the decision to use the material as a spacer "was driven by the opportunity for the beneficial re-use of the materials."

Bly told reporters that using such a mixture was "not an uncommon thing to do."

Lindner cast the choice in a different light.

"It's not something that we've ever done before," he said.

At a government hearing in August, BP manager David Sims was asked if he had ever used a similar mixture as a spacer.

"No, I have not," Sims said.

The BP report spreads much of the responsibility for the catastrophic blowout to other companies involved in the well operation, and it concludes that some of BP's most widely criticized decisions in the construction of the well probably did not contribute to the disaster.

Other companies involved in the operation have challenged the report's credibility, saying it is flawed and self-serving.

The report faults some aspects of BP's performance. For example, it says BP personnel misinterpreted the results of the pressure test, failing to recognize the danger. And it says BP did not do enough to assess the allegedly unsuccessful cement job.

But the report endorses a relatively benign explanation of BP's decision to use six devices called centralizers to stabilize the pipe in the well instead of the 21 recommended by contractor Halliburton. The report attributes it to an erroneous belief that BP did not have the right kind of centralizers on hand --- though it does not explain how such a mistake could happen --- and it says the decision probably did not contribute to the disaster.

In contrast, Democratic leaders of the House Energy and Commerce Committee have cited an internal BP e-mail as evidence that the company was interested in saving time and money.

In a statement after BP released the results of the Bly team investigation, Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Calif.), chairman of the energy and commerce committee, said the report "glosses over the role and responsibility of BP" and "regrettably does not address the corporate culture at BP that shortchanged safety and caused so much harm to the Gulf and the Deepwater Horizon workers."

The Bly team reached some conclusions that are difficult for the general reader to assess given their highly technical nature. The spacer issue is, in some respects, less complex.

Bly, who is BP's head of safety and operations, said that using the leftover fluids in the pressure test "would have been fine" if the material had not penetrated an area where it did not belong.

The report says M-I SWACO reviewed the mixture's properties and recommended it as suitable.

In his July testimony, Lindner of M-I SWACO said, "[W]e had the product there, and BP wanted to use it."

Lindner said to assess its suitability, he mixed a gallon of Form-A-Set in equal parts with Form-A-Squeeze and left it overnight to observe the reaction.

The amount of the fluid used in the test of the well's integrity was roughly double the volume of spacer usually used in pressure tests, Lindner said.

The Bly report's most detailed discussion of the spacer is contained in Appendix Q, which was not included in the 234-page document distributed at Wednesday's briefing. (Appendices A to H are in the printed document; the rest was issued electronically.)

Appendix Q says that, according to an M-I Swaco mud engineer, use of the mixture as a spacer "was not standard."