Oil from Gulf likely to reach South Florida waters, study says

The chance of oil from the Gulf blowout reaching the waters off Fort Lauderdale, Palm Beach and Miami is 61 to 80 percent, according to new projections released Friday by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Using data on wind, currents and the location of the oil, the NOAA study produced 500 scenarios of the possible courses that could be taken by the oil. Of these, the majority showed the oil -- most likely in the weathered, less toxic form of tar balls -- reaching the waters off southeast Florida.

The west coast of Florida fares better, with a less than a 1 percent chance of oil along the southwest coast and a 1 to 20 percent chance from Tampa nearly to the Panhandle. And north of Palm Beach County, where the Gulf Stream veers far offshore, the danger to Daytona Beach and other Atlantic coastal areas shrinks to 1 to 20 percent.

Because of the loop current, the stream of ocean water that runs from the Gulf of Mexico through the Florida Straits, southeast Florida is deemed to be much more at risk.

"This NOAA model shows where oil may be likely to travel, thereby giving coastal states and communities information about potential threats of shoreline impacts. This kind of information should assist in the preparation of adequate preparedness measures," said Jane Lubchenco, NOAA administrator, in a written statement. "NOAA is strongly committed to providing reliable information to the public and to responders at all levels."

To some extent, the NOAA study simply quantifies what authorities have been saying for more than a month -- that southeast Florida is likely to see some effects of the Gulf spill, probably in the form of tar balls rather than the far more destructive waves of heavy crude now washing into Louisiana's wetlands.

And the study comes loaded with qualifiers: It is not based on the current footprint of the spill but on the spill from the first day, only some scenarios take into account the disruption of the loop current by a large eddy to the north, and the study fails to adjust for the use of chemical dispersants to break up the oil.

The study attempts only to say whether oil would come within 20 miles of shore. Whether any oil gets to the beaches or not depends on local winds and currents, which

vary widely from day to day. And so far, no significant amounts of oil have been caught up in the loop current.

That brings little joy to tourism officials, who have been struggling to make clear to Europeans and Northeasterners that the presence of tar balls in Pensacola does not indicate the presence of tar balls in, say, Pompano Beach or Boca Raton.

"It's a very complicated study, and I understand the news media will likely do headlines talking about 61 to 80 percent, but it's very complicated," said Andy Newman, spokesman for the Monroe County Tourism Development Council. "They don't take into account a lot of factors, like dispersants. They count it if it gets within 20 miles of the coastline."

And whatever happens in the Keys and the rest of South Florida, he said, it will be nothing like the horrific disaster unfolding on the Gulf coast.

"Nobody likes tar balls," he said. "But if you have the choice, they're easier to deal with."

Newman said Keys hotels are going into the July Fourth weekend with about the same percentage of reservations as last year, despite concerns about the spill.

Nicki Grossman, president of the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention and Visitors Bureau, who has been supervising ad campaigns financed with BP money to spread the word that Broward's beaches are oil-free, said the new study will prolong unhelpful and misleading associations between Florida beaches and oil.

"That NOAA news is not news," she said. "That is the scenario upon which we based our preparations. Every time potential visitors read about the oil spill and Florida, we suffer. Most travelers don't distinguish between one coast and the other. Florida is Florida."

Grossman's organization has been spending $850,000 in BP money on television ad campaigns urging potential visitors to check eight 24-hour Web cams showing Broward's clean beaches.

NOAA officials say the study is a useful attempt to model the different scenarios that could materialize as oil from the spill travels on ocean currents and tides.

"This is really going to help Florida and other areas prepare and know what to expect," said Rachel Wilhelm, spokeswoman for NOAA. "You're getting 500 scenarios, but only one of them is going to happen."

But emergency officials in Broward and Palm Beach counties, who have been making plans for dealing with the arrival of oil for two months, said they saw little that was new in the NOAA model.

Chuck Lanza, emergency management director for Broward County, said the important thing will be to get a warning of a week or more -- which he expects -- so that the county can implement measures to protect beaches and other sensitive areas and be prepared to scoop up tar balls immediately.

"I'm just concerned that when it happens, we have early warning," he said.

Bill Johnson, Palm Beach County's emergency management director, said the county has already been preparing for the tar ball scenarios outlined in the NOAA models, getting ready to deal with tar balls or tar patties with such steps as laying booms across inlets and organizing beach cleanups."It's like a hurricane," he said. "The National Hurricane Center forecasts the path of the hurricane and you've got to prepare for it. The important thing is you know how to deal with it when it hits."

A Bad Day for the Drilling Industry

Wayne Nash. National Driller. The blowout, fire and sinking of the rig Deepwater Horizon, and the tragic loss of 11 of our peers in the drilling industry, will be with us much longer than it takes to clean up the environmental mess. Hopefully, by the time you read this, oil won't be flowing into the Gulf, but nothing is sure on this job. The rig was working at the limits of - maybe beyond - technology. It is similar to the first flights to the moon, or the Mars Rover. Progress is achieved by risk-taking. Think of your lifestyle if no one ever took a risk.

The facts are not in dispute, but the cause is. The well was drilled to T.D. and secured. The rig was within a few hours of moving to its next location. A bottom hole cement plug was set and tested. About the only thing left to do was set the top plug, displace the riser, disconnect and move.

For some yet-to-be-explained reason, the owners of the well decided to displace the riser (and 3,000 ft. of hole) with seawater before setting the top plug. As they were displacing the mud, they were pumping the mud overboard to a work boat to be used again. Displacement is a complex process where mud in vs. mud out is carefully monitored, but since they were pumping off, no one noticed that they were getting more mud back than they were displacing with seawater. This is because gas was coming into the hole - from where may take years to determine, longer if we let Congress do it. By the time the crew realized they were taking a kick, the gas was above the blow-out preventers. On this well, the blow-out preventers (BOPs) were at 5,000 feet below the rig. Consider this: One cubic foot of gas at 5,000 feet = 700 cubic feet of gas at the surface. By the time it approached the surface, nothing could stop it.

It was a calm day, so the gas didn't blow away, it just accumulated under the rig. Then the rig engines started inhaling the gas and ran away. Witnesses say, "The lights and computer screens got brighter just before the explosion." Since the pumps were on, they ran away too, speeding up until they cavitated and inhaled the gas. Then the pumps "dieseled," initiating the explosion. It blew the pumps through the pump room wall into the Gulf. All telemetry stopped. We know what happened next.

Probable Causes

Very seldom is an accident caused by just one thing, but one thing can trigger it. Think of the old saying, "For want of a nail, a shoe was lost, for want of shoe, a horse was lost, for want of a horse, a rider was lost," etc. There probably were several contributing factors to the blowout.

This incident probably will fuel conspiracy theories for years. The 'tin-foil-hat' brigade - my mother included - even has said that the North Koreans sabotaged the rig with a miniature submarine. More likely contributing factors include that the well originally was designed as an exploration well, not a production well. When BP realized how good the well was, the company decided to put it online. Only it was too late to change certain engineering requirements, like how much cement to pump at each casing shoe. Did this contribute?

Next, setting the top plug in seawater instead of mud. Seawater displacement lowered the hydrostatic head on the well too much. Did this contribute? Next, it is known that the BOPs were modified to allow the required testing to be done faster. Did this contribute? Did the crew properly monitor the seawater-in to mud-out ratio properly? Was the WOC (waiting-oncement) time adequate at this depth and temperature? It is obvious that BP wanted to move the rig as soon as possible; after all, it cost $500,000 a day. Bet they're not too worried about a paltry ½ million right about now....

There probably was not a single cause to this disaster, and there won't be a single solution. To put it into perspective, consider this: Oil has seeped into the surface environment for millions of years. People used it for medicines and many other purposes. The first commercial producing well in the United States - the Drake well in Pennsylvania - was drilled because it was near a seep. All of this oil entering our environment has caused no long-term damage because there are naturally occurring bacteria that eat it. The process works remarkably well.

The environmental lobby still likes to cite the Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska as a reason why we should never drill anywhere. What they don't bother to mention: In the area that had all the rocks steam-cleaned, at a cost of millions, they managed to assuage their guilt and drive the oil deep enough under the rocks so that natural forces couldn't deal with it. Go there now, and you can turn over rocks with oil under them. Go a few miles up the beach, where no cleanup was done, and you can't find a trace of oil. Wonderful thing, nature. One good hurricane probably will help a lot, and might even make some people understand that they shouldn't live below sea level unless they wear wooden shoes.

The news media will continue to demand result without even knowing the terms to describe the problem. One of their favorites seems to be "blow-out protector" rather than blow-out preventer. For those readers who have journalism degrees instead of dirt under their fingernails, I'll explain: These devices prevent blowouts, not protect them. One of the flunkies said recently that if BP didn't do better, they'd just "push them out of the way and take over." And do what? I doubt most of them could drill a cowpie out of a churn. BP has more deepwater experience than almost anybody, and are doing all they can. Let's let them do it, and start the dog-and-pony-show later.

BP costs for oil spill response pass $3 billion

NEW ORLEANS - BP's costs for the disastrous Gulf of Mexico oil spill climbed nearly half a billion dollars in the past week, raising the oil giant's tab to just over $3 billion for work on cleaning and capping the gusher and payouts to individuals, businesses and governments.

London-based BP PLC, the largest oil and gas producer in the Gulf, released its latest tally of response costs Monday. The total of $3.12 billion was up from $2.65 billion a week earlier. The figure does not include a $20 billion fund for Gulf damages BP created last month.

As BP continued drilling relief wells that are the best hope for plugging the blown-out well, a giant new oil skimming vessel was tested in the Gulf. But lousy weather means it may be longer than first hoped before officials know if it can work full-time sucking crude from the sea.

The Taiwanese skimmer dubbed "A Whale" has been able to show off its maneuverability during a weekend test in a 25-mile-square patch of water just north of the site where an April 20 explosion on the Deepwater Horizon killed 11 workers and started the worst oil spill in Gulf history.

TMT, the shipping firm that owns the vessel, had hoped to test a containment boom system designed to direct greater volumes of oily water into the 12 vents or "jaws" that the ship uses to suck it in, according to spokesman Bob Grantham.

But lingering bad weather in the form of stiff winds and choppy seas has made that impossible, and prevented a flotilla of smaller skimmers from working offshore along the coasts of Alabama, Mississippi and Florida.

"As was the case yesterday, the sea state, with waves at times in excess of 10 feet, is not permitting optimal testing conditions," Grantham said in an e-mail Sunday.

The skimmers, which have been idle off the coasts since a spell of bad weather last week kicked up by Hurricane Alex, were on the water along the Louisiana coast over the weekend. Officials with the U.S. Coast Guard are waiting for the weather to improve before sending them out elsewhere."We've got our guys out there and they're docked and ready, but safety is a huge concern for us, especially with the smaller vessels," said Courtnee Ferguson, a spokeswoman for the Joint Information Command in Mobile, Ala.

On Sunday, huge barges used to collect oil from skimming vessels were parked at the mouth of Mobile Bay, waiting for conditions to subside as waves rose to about 5 feet high miles offshore.The current spate of bad weather is likely to last well into next week, according to the National Weather Service.

"This should remain fairly persistent through the next few days, and maybe get a little worse," meteorologist Mike Efferson said.

On the shore, beach cleanup crews were making progress on new oil that washed up thanks to the high tides generated by last week's bad weather.

In Grand Isle, about 800 people were removing tar balls and liquid oil from seven miles of beach, Coast Guard Cmdr. Randal Ogrydziak said.

"In a day or two, you wouldn't be able to tell the oil was even there," he said.

By Wednesday, Ogrydziak said they should have a machine on the beach that washes sand where the oil washed ashore.

Crews have also been working to put containment boom thrown around by the storms back into place, he said.

So far, weather has not slowed drilling on two relief wells meant to finally plug the spill. BP officials have said they're running slightly ahead of schedule on the drilling, but expect weather or other delays.

Early to mid-August is still the timeframe for the completion of the drilling.

Along with the drilling, the capture and burning of oil and gas at the site of the leaking well has gone on without interruption from the weather. But the choppy seas have delayed the operation of another vessel that officials say will roughly double the amount of oil being collected or burned.

The Helix Producer is supposed to connect with the leaking well by a flexible hose that will help it disconnect and reconnect quickly if a hurricane or other major storm forces an evacuation of the site.

Coast Guard officials say they're hoping to have the Helix Producer connected to the well and collecting oil by Wednesday.

Associated Press

Total to Develop Gas Field in Barents Sea

By Geraldine Amiel

Total plans to develop the huge Shtokman natural gas field in the Barents Sea remain on track, with a final investment decision expected in 2011, Arnaud Breuillac, the company's senior vice-president for Continental Europe and Central Asia, said in an interview."Shtokman is not being further delayed," Breuillac said, dismissing rumors that the project was facing further postponement due to the gas price weakness after lengthy earlier delays.

The consortium holding rights to the field has decided to split its development, with a final decision on the natural gas extraction in March 2011 and a decision on liquefying the gas "around nine months after the natural gas part, by end 2011," Breuillac said.