

# Leaky oil well to stay capped

## Possibility of evacuating ships won't disrupt relief seal

By Colleen Long and Harry Weber  
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITERS

ON THE GULF OF MEXICO — The temporary cap on BP's ruptured oil well will stay closed even if ships evacuate the Gulf of Mexico during a tropical storm, the federal government's spill chief said Thursday.

Growing confidence in the mechanical plug's security convinced scientists it was safe to leave it unmonitored for a few days, Retired Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen said. He said they'll decide Thursday evening whether dozens of ships in the area will leave.

"While this is not a hurricane, it's a storm that will have probably some significant impacts, so we're taking appropriate cautions," Allen said.

Forecasters at the U.S. National Hurricane Center in Miami say the storm system already has caused flooding in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

The system could become

Tropical Storm Bonnie later Thursday and reach the Gulf of Mexico by Saturday.

Work on plugging the well is at a standstill just days before the expected completion of a relief tunnel to permanently throttle the free-flowing crude.

If work crews are evacuated, it could be two weeks before they can resume the effort to kill the well. That would upset BP's timetable, which called for finishing the relief tunnel by the end of July and plugging the blown-out well by early August.

Even if the storm misses the area, work on the relief tunnel will be delayed by about a week, BP Vice President Kent Wells said.

Seas already were choppy in the Gulf, with waves up to five feet rocking boats as crews prepared to leave if needed. Some boats involved in the cleanup were called into port Thursday, Coast Guard Rear Adm. Paul Zukunft said.

He also directed workers to remove booms from marsh areas along the coast to prevent dam-

age to ecologically sensitive areas.

Even if the storm does not hit the area directly, it could affect the effort to contain the oil and clean it up.

Hurricane Alex stayed 500 miles away last month, yet skimming in Alabama, Mississippi and Florida was curtailed for nearly a week.

Crews had planned to spend Wednesday and Thursday reinforcing with cement the last few feet of the relief tunnel that will be used to pump mud into the gusher and kill it once and for all.

But BP put the task on hold and instead placed a temporary plug called a storm packer deep inside the tunnel, in case it has to be abandoned until the storm passes.

"What we didn't want to do is be in the middle of an operation and potentially put the relief well at some risk," BP vice president Kent Wells said.

The relief tunnel extends two miles under the seabed. It's about four feet from the side of

the well, although BP still has more than 100 feet to drill diagonally before the tunnel reaches the well.

BP plans to insert a final string of casing, or drilling pipe, cement it into place, and give it up to a week to set, before attempting to punch through to the blown-out well and kill it.

The two rigs drilling relief tunnels will disconnect from the well if they have to evacuate the site. All appeared quiet on the rigs Thursday afternoon.

BP's broken well spewed somewhere between 94 million and 184 million gallons into the Gulf before the cap was attached.

The White House said Thursday President Barack Obama and his family will vacation on the Gulf Coast next month, visiting Florida for a weekend retreat.

Both the president and First Lady Michelle Obama have made a point of encouraging people to visit Gulf Coast beaches that are open and free of oil damage to help the local economy.



Charles Dharapak/Associated Press  
Rangel is charged with violating ethics.

# House charges Rangel

## Veteran leader violated ethics

By Larry Margasak  
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

WASHINGTON — A House investigative committee on Thursday charged New York Rep. Charles Rangel with multiple ethics violations, a serious blow to the former Ways and Means chairman and an election-year headache for Democrats.

The committee did not immediately specify the charges against the Democrat, who has served in the House for some 40 years and is fourth in seniority. The charges by a four-member panel of the House ethics committee sends the case to a House trial, where a separate eight-member panel of Republicans and Democrats will decide whether the violations can be proved by clear and convincing evidence.

The timing of the announcement ensures that a public airing of Rangel's ethical woes will stretch into the fall campaign, and Republicans are certain to make it an issue as they try to capture majority control of the House. Speaker Nancy Pelosi had once promised to "drain the swamp" of ethical misdeeds by lawmakers in arguing that Democrats should be in charge.

Rangel led the tax-writing Ways and Means panel until he stepped aside last March after the ethics committee criticized him in a separate case — finding that he should have known corporate money was paying for his trips to two Caribbean conferences.

Officials said that in the current case, the committee and Rangel's attorney tried unsuccessfully to negotiate a settlement. The sources spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private discussions. A settlement would have required Rangel to agree that he violated ethics rules.

The investigation of Rangel has focused on:

—His use of official stationery to raise money for the Charles B. Rangel Center for Public Service at City College of New York.

—Whether he had the Ways and Means Committee consider legislation that would benefit donors to the Rangel Center at the same time the congressman solicited donations or pledges.

—Preservation of a tax shelter for an oil drilling company, Nabors Industries, which has a chief executive who donated money to the center while Rangel's committee considered the loophole legislation.

—Use of four rent-controlled apartment units in New York City, when the city's rent stabilization program is supposed to apply to one's primary residence. This raises the question of how all the units could be primary residences. One was a campaign office, raising a separate question of whether the rent break was an improper gift.

—Whether Rangel, as required, publicly reported information on the financing and rental of his ownership interest in a unit within the Punta Cana Yacht Club in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic. Rangel also had to pay back taxes on the rental income.

—Whether he intentionally failed to report — when required — hundreds of thousands of dollars or more in assets. The amended disclosure reports added a credit union IRA, mutual fund accounts and stock.

Rangel had hoped to regain his chairmanship, but the allegations make that virtually impossible this year.

He announced a bid for a 21st term recently, days before his 80th birthday. One of his Sept. 14 primary opponents is Adam Clayton Powell IV, son of the former congressman whom Rangel defeated in 1970.

# Reid, Democrats drop energy bill

By Matthew Daly  
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

WASHINGTON — Senate Democrats on Thursday gave up plans to attempt to pass an energy-global warming bill that caps greenhouse gases, abandoning a priority of President Barack Obama.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said no Republican was willing to back a comprehensive energy bill, a development that he called "terribly disappointing."

Democrats have been trying for more than a year to pass a plan that charges power plants and other large polluters for their heat-trapping carbon emissions, which contribute to global warming.

The House voted 219-212 last year for a "cap and trade" plan featuring economic incentives to reduce heat-trapping gases from power plants, vehicles and other sources.

Republicans slammed the bill as a "national energy tax" and jobs killer, arguing that the costs would be passed on to consumers in the form of higher electricity bills and fuel costs that would lead more manufacturers to take their factories offshore. Moderate House Democrats who voted for the bill, particularly freshmen from Republican-leaning districts, are among the GOP's top takeover targets in the November election.

In recent weeks, Senate Democrats floated a more modest approach that would limit the carbon tax to the electricity sector. That plan, which drew support from the White House and words of encouragement from Republican Sen. Olympia Snowe



Alex Brandon/Associated Press  
Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., talks about the energy bill.

of Maine, was never formally proposed.

But the plan, too, failed to attract the necessary 60 votes to advance it along in the 100-member Senate.

Instead, Reid and other Democrats said they would focus on a narrower bill that responds to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and improves energy efficiency.

"We've always known from Day One that to pass comprehensive energy reform you've got to have 60 votes," Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., said at a Capitol news conference with Reid and White House energy adviser Carol Browner. "As we stand here today we don't have one Republican vote." Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C.,

had been negotiating with Kerry and Sen. Joe Lieberman, I-Conn., for months, but Graham withdrew his support in May, saying it was impossible to pass the legislation because of disagreements over issues like offshore drilling and efforts by Democratic leaders to focus on an immigration reform bill first.

Browner said Obama continues to support a comprehensive bill that includes a cap on carbon emissions but that the president supports Reid's decision to go forward with a narrower bill. For Obama the effort ranked behind only overhauling the nation's health care system and its financial regulations on his list of priorities. Reid said the new bill will likely

focus on holding oil giant BP PLC responsible for the Gulf spill, as well as ways to improve energy efficiency, boost incentives for natural gas vehicles and increase spending on land and water conservation.

Sen. Bob Casey, D-Pa., said he was frustrated that Senate leaders were giving up on the carbon tax — at least for now. "But we still have time this summer to keep working and lining up votes — in September as well. And we just have to keep working," Casey said.

A bill focused on the Gulf oil spill "is probably the best we can do now," Casey said, but added that he and others would continue to work for a comprehensive approach.

Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., who opposed the planned carbon tax, said he thought he could support the more limited energy package, but he said he wanted to see the details.

Nelson said Reid and Kerry were wise to withdraw the carbon tax, which many environmental groups say is the best way to combat global climate change.

"It takes 60 votes. And if you can't get 60 votes for a package, there's no reason to bring it to the floor," Nelson said.

David Hawkins, director of climate programs at the Natural Resources Defense Council, said Reid had delivered bad news to the American people. He called climate change a "real and present danger" that Congress needs to address after the August recess.

"Don't fail us," Hawkins said, addressing his remarks to U.S. lawmakers. "Don't fail our children."

# Obama, Vilsack apologize to ousted worker

By Mary Clare Jalonick  
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

WASHINGTON — Flooded with apologies from everywhere, Shirley Sherrod got the biggest "I'm sorry" of all Thursday — from a contrite President Barack Obama, who personally appealed to the ousted worker to come back.

Sherrod, who was forced to resign on Monday because of racial comments she made at an NAACP gathering, was asked by Obama to rejoin the federal government and transform "this misfortune" into a chance to use her life experiences to help people, said White House press secretary Robert Gibbs.

Obama had stayed out of the public brouhaha that followed Sherrod's ouster from the Agriculture Department after a conservative blog posted a clip of the black woman's comments and portrayed her as racist.

Once it became clear that the speech in question was advocating racial reconciliation, not racism, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack apologized to her and offered her a new job Wednesday. Gibbs also apologized publicly "for the entire administration."

Thursday morning, Obama spoke by phone with Sherrod and said he hoped she would accept Agriculture's offer of a new position, Gibbs said. He added that Obama thought Sherrod was "very gracious."

Sherrod said she hadn't decided whether she would accept the invitation to come back, but she did accept the apologies.

As top government officials begged for her forgiveness, Sherrod did not shy away from

"This is a good woman. She's been through hell ... I could have done and should have done a better job."

Tom Vilsack  
Agricultural Secretary

telling her story on television. She hopped from network to network, even chatting with the ladies of ABC's "The View" and letting CNN film part of her call with Obama as she traveled the streets of New York City in a car.

Even the president of the United States had a hard time getting to Sherrod while she did interviews.

Obama had tried to reach her twice Wednesday night but could not, said a White House official. She was on a plane traveling from Atlanta to New York, where she appeared on several morning shows.

The fracas started when Sherrod was forced to resign as Georgia's director of rural development Monday after a conservative blogger posted a video of her telling a crowd at a local NAACP meeting about her initial reluctance 24 years ago to help a poor white farmer seeking government assistance.

Sherrod took to the media Tuesday denying that her comments were racist, and the NAACP — which had at first condemned her remarks, then later apologized — posted the full 43-minute video showing the entire speech.

The farmer in question also did interviews and said Sherrod had eventually helped him save his farm.

Conservative blogger Andrew Breitbart said he had posted a

portion of Sherrod's remarks in an effort to illustrate that racism exists in the NAACP, an argument he was using to counter allegations by the civil rights organization of racism in the tea party movement.

"He was willing to destroy me ... in order to try to destroy the NAACP," Sherrod said Thursday. She said she might consider suing Breitbart for defamation.

Breitbart, who has not responded to requests for comment from The Associated Press, offered a narrow correction on his website, BigGovernment.com.

He acknowledged that Sherrod's remarks about hesitating to help the white farmer referenced something that took place before she worked for the government.

The site had previously said her comments were about her work as a USDA employee.

However, the site has not backed off its claim that Sherrod's remarks were racist and still labels the Sherrod posting with the heading, "Video Proof — The NAACP Rewards Racism."

Sherrod has said she resigned under White House pressure, but Vilsack has said repeatedly the decision was his.

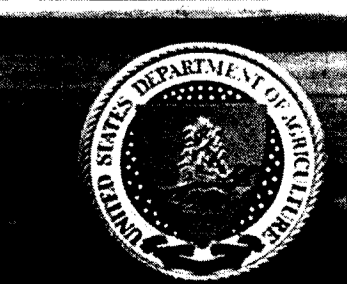
In offering his remorse Wednesday, he told reporters: "This is a good woman. She's been through hell ... I could have done and should have done a better job."

As Obama stayed out of the public fray before the phone call, questions remained about White House involvement in the decision to ask Sherrod to resign. Had there been White House pressure?

"No," insisted Vilsack. He said he made the decision without knowing all the facts and regretted it.

"I am accepting the responsibility with deep regret," he told a news conference.

Gibbs, too, has insisted the decision was made at the Agriculture Department. He told reporters that Obama spoke with Vilsack on Wednesday night, but he wouldn't discuss the substance of the conversation. Gibbs said he doesn't see any reason for Vilsack to resign.



J. Scott Applewhite/Associated Press  
Vilsack speaks at a press conference.