BP Casts Blame for Failure of Device

By BEN CASSELMAN and SIOBHAN HUGHES

HOUSTON—Undocumented changes to the blowout preventer that should have shut down BP PLC's runaway Gulf well slowed efforts to stop the flow of oil, a BP official testified Wednesday.

After spending days trying to use underwater robots to trigger the blowout preventer, a huge stack of valves on the seafloor designed to seal the well in an emergency, workers discovered that it had been modified, Harry Thierens, a BP vice president overseeing the effort, testified at hearings in Houston.

The controls that the robots were trying to use that were supposed to close the valves were actually connected to a testing device that couldn't shut off the well, he said.

"There was a lot of emotion in the room at that time," Mr. Thierens said about the discovery. "I was quite astonished that this could have happened."

It isn’t clear whether the modifications to the blowout preventer actually extended the oil spill. Even after they learned of the modifications, workers still couldn’t make the blowout preventer work.

The failure of the blowout preventer to stop the initial explosion or to shut down the well afterward is a central mystery in the Gulf disaster, which killed 11 people and set off the worst offshore oil spill in U.S. history.

The device was owned and maintained by Transocean Ltd., the Swiss-based contractor hired by BP to drill the well.

BP has said that Transocean bears at least partial responsibility for the Gulf disaster because of the equipment's failure, and the companies have been casting blame on each other.

Documents show that BP ordered Transocean to install the testing device in 2004.

But Mr. Thierens said there appeared to be other changes made to the blowout preventer that BP hadn’t ordered, and said Transocean struggled to provide blueprints showing the device's updated design.

In a statement, Transocean said that the blowout preventer had passed numerous tests in the days and weeks leading up to the disaster, and that the modifications had no impact on efforts to shut down the well afterward.

At the hearings, Transocean subsea supervisor Mark Hay testified that the blowout preventer was
overdue for some maintenance and had several leaks, although he said the leaks shouldn't have prevented the device from working. "Everything functioned," said Mr. Hay, adding that workers decided it wasn't necessary to pull up the device for repairs.

Separately, in Washington, leaders of a presidential commission investigating the Gulf spill criticized the government's oversight of the offshore oil industry, and questioned why government scientists weren't consulted more extensively about a White House decision last March to expand offshore drilling.

Former Florida Sen. Bob Graham, the commission's co-chair, called the spill an "enormous and shared failure of public policy."

Nancy Sutley, the chair of the White House's Council on Environmental Quality, told the panel that her group wasn't asked about the March decision to expand offshore drilling, which was part of an effort to reach Republicans who would be crucial to passing broader energy and climate legislation.

"We viewed those decisions and announcements as being within the purview of the secretary of the Interior," she said.

Jane Lubchenco, the administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said that she "was not directly involved in reviewing the plans" and had raised some concerns about the proposal. "Many of them were incorporated into the final decision—but not all of them," she said.

William Reilly, a co-chair of the panel, said he was "disappointed that a policy to expand so significantly the area of offshore oil and gas would not have involved direct consultation with the CEQ chair."

The White House referred questions to the Interior Department. The Interior Department said that the plan reflected 500,000 public comments.

The former head of the disbanded U.S. Minerals Management Service, who left her job in May, stood by the White House's offshore-drilling policies.

Liz Birnbaum, the former director of the agency, said she had provided Interior Secretary Ken Salazar "with every piece of information I could" before the department in March announced a plan to expand offshore drilling in the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico, and off the coast of Alaska.

"I cannot tell you the number of meetings we had," she told the panel. "In the end, I supported the administration's decision."

—Angel Gonzalez contributed to this article.

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