



BP's Deepwater Oil Spill - The Australian Oil Spill - and Open Thread

Posted by [Phil Hart](#) on August 15, 2010 - 10:40am in [The Oil Drum: Australia/New Zealand](#)

Topic: [Supply/Production](#)

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Update by Gail, Sunday am: BP has been told to keep working on its relief well. On Saturday, Admiral Allen said he wanted additional testing before BP was given orders to proceed with the relief well, and those test would not be available until late Monday or early Tuesday. So it will be at least late Tuesday before he gives is order to proceed, putting the timing of the interception off until at least next week-end.

The Age in Melbourne has an article about a possible moratorium on oil and gas drilling in Australian waters, as a result of the BP spill in the Gulf of Mexico and the [Montara oil spill](#) in the Timor Sea off Australia last year. A review into the Montara accident has just been completed but has not been released, for 'legal reasons'. Apparently prosecutions may be in order. It's a pity as the review may highlight some common factors with the Gulf of Mexico spill, particularly in relation to the failure of the BOPs to seal the well.



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[Wikipedia: The Montara Oil Spill](#)

The Montara oil spill was an oil and gas leak and subsequent slick that took place in the Montara oil field in the Timor Sea, off the northern coast of Western Australia. It is considered one of Australia's worst oil disasters. The slick was released following a blowout from the Montara wellhead platform on August 21, 2009, and continued leaking until November 3, 2009 (in total 74 days), when the leak was stopped by pumping mud into the well and the wellbore cemented thus "capping" the blowout. The West Atlas rig is owned by the Norwegian-Bermudan Seadrill, and operated by PTTEP Australasia, a subsidiary of PTT Exploration and Production (PTTEP) which is in turn a subsidiary of PTT, the Thai state-owned oil and gas company was operating over on adjacent well on the Montara platform. The Montara field is located off the Kimberley coast, 250 km (160 mi) north of Truscott airbase, and 690 km (430 mi) west of Darwin. Sixty-nine workers were evacuated from the West Atlas jackup drilling rig when the blowout occurred.

The Australian Department of Resources, Energy and Tourism estimated that the Montara oil leak could be as high as 2000 barrels/day, five times the 400 barrels/day estimated by PTTEP Australasia. After flying over the spill site, Australian Greens Senator Rachel Siewert claimed the spill was far greater than had originally been reported. WWF-Australia also claimed that the spill was worse than originally expected.

The first four attempts to plug the oil leak by PTTEP failed, but the fifth attempt succeeded on November 3, 2009, when PTTEP pumped approximately 3,400 barrels of mud into a relief well to stop the leak.

On November 1, 2009, during an attempt to plug the leak, a fire broke out on the West Atlas drilling rig. On November 2, PTTEP said that the fire appeared to be burning off the oil and thereby preventing further leakage into the sea. The fire was largely extinguished when the leak was stopped. Once safety criteria was met, a specialist team boarded the Montara wellhead platform and the West Atlas to assess the damages.

Given how much outrage the BP spill has caused in the United States, it's remarkable that after the first few days, the Montara oil spill was largely ignored by everyone in Australia and was probably never heard of in most parts of the world. This despite being our nation's largest oil spill and causing an oil slick 180 km (110 mi) wide (not bad for what was really a gas well and considering that much of the oil burnt at the wellhead). With so little public outrage, there has been very little pressure on the operators PTTEP to release details of the incident to the public. The official review has now been completed but even that may not be available for quite sometime:

[The Age: Why the oil minister doesn't feel too well right now](#)

We have not heard much about the Montara incident. No one was killed and maybe 30,000 barrels of oil spilled into the sea over a few months ... that's less than BP's Deepwater Horizon was thought to be gushing into the Gulf of Mexico per day. And Australian-listed companies were not involved in Montara. The key companies involved were PTTEP of Thailand, and Atlas and Halliburton, both of the US.

But as luck would have it, an extended investigation of the Timor Sea incident has just been completed. The report was handed to Martin Ferguson last Friday ... and the first thing the minister did was hold on to the document for "a legal review". Now you might think that is an easy way out for a government that will be damned if it responds to the Greens and doubly damned by a raging multinational resources sector. But the report has been delayed for public release on advice of the Solicitor-General. In other words, there is the real possibility of prosecutions following the Montara incident.

That's a pity because there is likely to be a lot of information in this inquiry relevant to the Deepwater Horizon blowout. But already it adds weight to the idea that there have been [a large number of accidents and 'near misses'](#) and that a serious blowout and failure of the BOP was not as 'unforseeable' as some in the industry have claimed. If prosecutions are a 'real possibility', then clearly somebody or some companies have not been doing their jobs very well. Some of the companies involved in the Deepwater Horizon blowout will surely be a little worried at the moment?

And is Martin Ferguson brave (or stupid?) enough not to consider a moratorium on new drilling in Australian waters until the reviews of both incidents can be acted upon?



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