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Big Storm to Hit Gulf of Mexico … All Oil Relief Operations Will Be Suspended … Cap Will Stay On, Unattended

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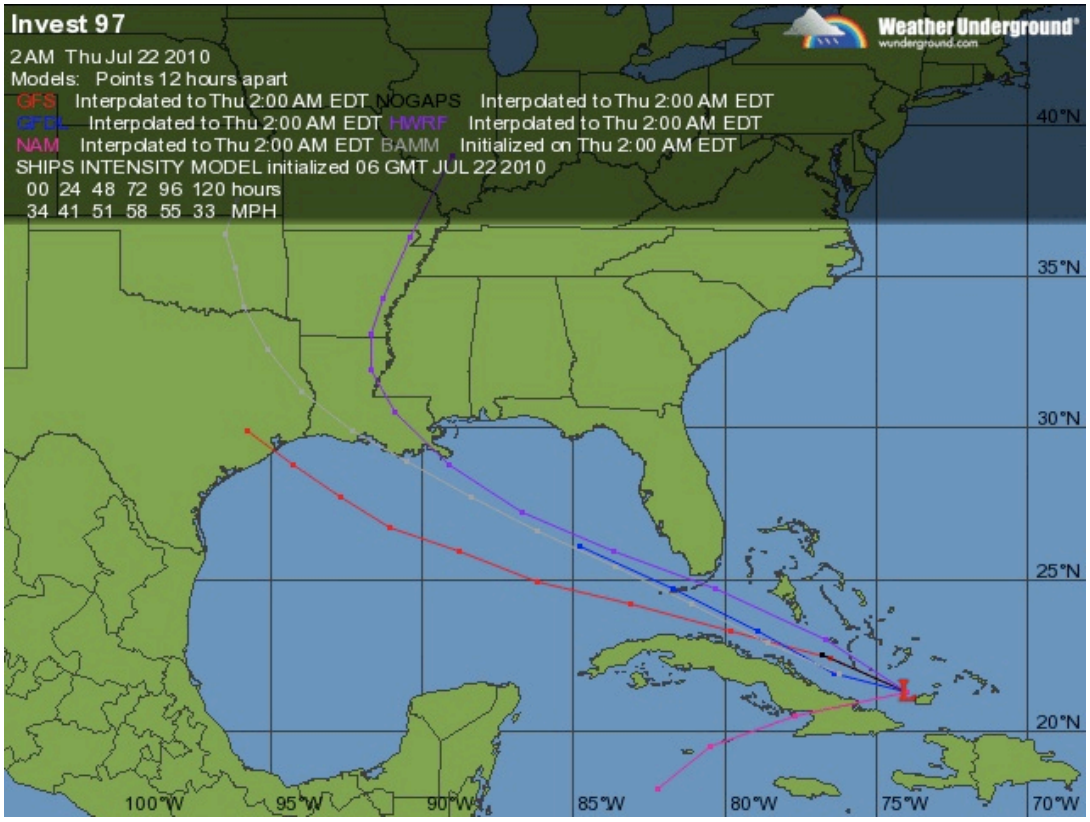
Theme: Environment
In-depth Report: THE BP OIL SLICK

As oil industry expert Bob Cavnar writes:

> The National Hurricane Center this morning forecasted a 70% chance that Invest 97, now just south of the Bahamas, would form into a tropical cyclone. Destination? The central Gulf. In his McBriefing yesterday, Kent Wells announced that instead of running and cementing the last liner into relief well 1, they had already run in a storm packer to temporarily seal the well and were preparing to shut down. Here's the storm track by computer model.



In other words, BP is shutting down its drilling of the relief wells until the storm passes.

Cavnar points out that this could be awhile:

> A hurricane, or even a tropical storm, will cause 10 days to 2 weeks of delay. Yesterday, [Admiral Thad] Allen said that the

> decision whether to open the capping stack or leave it closed was currently being discussed. Without monitoring, there is fear of a major leak causing serious damage to the wellhead endangering future containment efforts. He also said that they would leave an ROV boat as last boat out, since it can travel faster than the service vessels.

I agree with what Cavnar as written previously: instead of doing the "well integrity test", BP might have been able to kill the well by now if it hadn't suspended drilling of the relief wells so that it could run that test.

It is not yet clear whether the storm will turn into a hurricane. As I warned on May 14th, there is a possibility that a hurricane could spread the oil inland.

The Weather Channel notes today:

> "The oil movement will be strongly impacted not only by what the storm track is but how large the storm is," says Luettich. "A small storm that has very strong winds could have a very large impact. But also a weaker storm that is larger will also have an impact."
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> "A hurricane on Katrina's path would push a lot of stuff onto shore, given where a lot of the oil is right now," says Luettich.
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> A storm that moves up the west coast of Florida may be the best case scenario for the oil slick, if there is such a thing. It may push the oil farther out to sea and help disperse it more.
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> What happens when the hurricane moves inland? It's not just coastal residents affected by the massive storms. The remnants can affect communities hundreds of miles inland.
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> As the hurricane moves inland it will pick up particles of oil. That will become part of the sea spray that moves inland with the storm. According to Chris Zappa, an oceanographer at Columbia University, we're likely to see a light coating of oil on electrical wires and trees. He likens it to standing in sea spray for a while. You'll walk away with a light sheen of salt water on your skin. Instead of salt water, it will feel like oil water.
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> However, this would be a very localized effect. For example if a hurricane made landfall in Alabama, the coastal communities would feel the oily sea spray. However, it wouldn't make it to Montgomery or even Dothan, which are both more than hour inland.
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> Thinking about a sheen of oil on your skin may give you the heebie jeebies, but it won't hurt you. Experts at NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) say the amount of oil that would be carried inland in water vapor would be less than normal levels of pollution.

I don't believe anyone has studied the potential effect of a hurricane on the large amounts of methane released by the oil gusher, and the millions of gallons of Corexit sprayed into the Gulf. While some blithely dismiss any danger and others are giving apocalyptic visions, I don't think anyone really knows how bad it could be.

The government has just announced that the cap will stay on – unattended – throughout the storm. Specifically, National Incident Commander Thad Allen just announced:

> The decision has been made to leave the cap on, even if the well is unattended.

I hope and pray that the well does not blow out while no one is looking.

Hurricanes can also tear up the seafloor, but probably only in shallow waters. As pointed out in a study conducted by the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory at Stennis Space Center, Mississippi (via Science Daily):

> Based on unique measurements taken directly under a powerful hurricane, the new study's calculations are the first to show that hurricanes propel underwater currents with enough oomph to dig up the seabed, potentially creating underwater mudslides and damaging pipes or other equipment resting on the bottom.
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> The research team found that strong currents along the sea floor pushed and pulled on the seabed, scouring its surface. "Usually you only see this in very shallow water, where waves break on the beach, stirring up sand," says David Wang, co-author of the study. "In hurricanes, the much bigger waves can stir up the seafloor all the way down to 90 meters [300 feet]."
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> Hurricanes considerably weaker than Ivan, which was category-4, could still tear up the seafloor, causing significant damage as deep as 90 meters.

But even thought the ill-fated well is too deep to suffer a direct hit by a hurricane, there are many things which could still go wrong.

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