OBAMA BEEFS UP OIL SPILL RESPONSE

ENVIRONMENT: President announces measures to avoid another oil rig disaster

RESPONDING TO A BARRAGE of bad news and public anger over the monthlong BP oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico, President Barack Obama on May 27 announced a freeze on new exploratory drilling activities and signaled upcoming regulatory reforms within the Minerals Management Service (MMS), the Department of the Interior agency that oversees offshore oil and gas drilling.

Only hours before Obama’s briefing, the U.S. Geological Survey said it had found the size of the leak to be between 17 million and 39 million gal, making it the worst oil spill in U.S. history, far exceeding the Exxon Valdez’ 11 million gal. Also on that same morning, the Interior Department said MMS head S. Elizabeth Birnbaum had resigned.

The President described his intention to end the “cozy and sometimes corrupt” relationship between MMS inspectors and the oil industry and to create a new top-level commission to examine the BP spill and oil drilling oversight in general. Meanwhile, he said, past decisions to allow exploratory drilling this summer in the environmentally sensitive areas of the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas off the Alaska coast would be canceled. And a proposal to move ahead with sales of drilling leases in the Gulf and off the coast of Virginia would be suspended. Drilling already taking place in 33 exploratory deep-water wells in the Gulf would also be stopped for six months.

In addition, the President announced that MMS would begin enforcing “aggressive new operating standards” for oil and gas drilling, including a split within MMS separating the issuance of drilling permits from enforcement of safety regulations.

Reporters at the briefing quizzed Obama about BP’s leadership role in running the cleanup and differences of opinion between the government and the oil company over the cleanup.

One of those conflicts concerned the environmental impact of the unprecedented use of chemical dispersants in the cleanup; another is the disagreement between BP and the Environmental Protection Agency over the dispersant the company selected to use in the Gulf. As a result, EPA announced last week that the agency’s scientists would perform their own tests to find a more effective, less toxic alternative to the BP-selected dispersant.

On May 24, EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson said agency scientists would collect toxicity and effectiveness data on dispersants and compare them with data for Corexit 9500, BP’s dispersant choice.

The agency’s announcement followed BP’s defense of Corexit 9500 after EPA ordered the company to search for another dispersant. In a letter to the agency, BP Chief Operating Officer Doug Suttles raised concerns that Sea Brat #4, made by Texas-based Alabama Corp., and other alternative dispersants may break down to potential endocrine disrupters called nonylphenols.

As of May 26, cleanup crews had applied more than 840,000 gal of dispersants to break up the leaking oil and prevent it from hitting coastal wetlands. Because the environmental risks of these levels of dispersants are unknown, EPA called for a 75% reduction in the amount of dispersants sprayed daily.

BP also said last week that it would support examination of the environmental impact of oil dispersants. The company will commit up to $500 million over 10 years for studies of the spill’s impact on the marine and shoreline environment of the Gulf. Louisiana State University will receive the first grant.

BP plans to fund research on the fate of oil and dispersants and their impact on wildlife in the Gulf and coastline, as well as the impact of dispersants on biodegradation of the oil. Researchers will also study ways to improve technology to detect oil and dispersants and to remediate accidental releases. —JEFF JOHNSON, MICHAEL TORRICE, AND MELODY VOITH