

Report blames rig crew for 2013 gas well blowout

Associated Press 10:33 a.m. CDT September 21, 2015



(Photo: AP)

NEW ORLEANS — A long-delayed federal investigative report into a Gulf well blowout two years ago blames the drilling rig's crew for not using a dense enough fluid to control natural gas in the well and for reacting too slowly when the blowout started.

The government report, released last week, looked at the root causes for the blowout of a Walter Oil & Gas well off the central Louisiana coast on July 23, 2013. The rig, provided by Hercules Offshore, burned for 72 hours and was destroyed at a cost of nearly \$60 million, according to Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement regional director Lars Herbst.

The report comes on the heels of an inspector general's report criticizing the agency for understaffing its investigation unit and as Republicans are mounting loud opposition to tougher safety rules proposed by the Obama administration.

Lawmakers and industry representatives said at a congressional field hearing in New Orleans this week that they oppose tougher certification requirements for blowout preventers, the last-ditch mechanisms used to shut in a wild offshore well, because it would force rigs to go out of service once every five years.

But while the blowout preventer failed to close properly in the 2013 accident, investigators mostly pinned that on human error. The report says employees of Walter and Hercules should have recognized a "kick" of natural gas in the well earlier and likely would have prevented the accident if they had activated the blowout preventer at the right time.

It says that by the time someone on the rig tried to close the blowout preventer's valves and seals, those shut-in devices likely had suffered damage from the high-pressure flow of gas. In addition, the report said the crew should not have reduced the density of well fluid that was keeping natural gas from blowing out of the well.

The findings are reminiscent of some of what happened in 2010 with BP's Macondo well, in that investigators also blamed the rig crew for removing important drilling fluid too soon and for not recognizing signs of a blowout.

But the BP disaster was also different in many ways. It involved an oil well in deep water, there were clear mechanical failures in the blowout preventer, 11 workers were killed and the well spewed polluting crude into the Gulf for 87 days. The Walter blowout was a natural gas well in shallow water and caused only minor injuries to some of the 44 crew members who were forced to evacuate. The well essentially caved in on itself.

The crew on the Hercules rig suffered some eye and skin injuries when zinc bromide completion fluid rained down on them, another factor that prevented them from doing all they could to shut in the well, the report said.

The report was released just weeks after an Interior Department inspector general's report stated that the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement had failed to hire enough staff in its Investigations and Review Unit or give them sufficient training.

Agency spokesman Greg Julian said the Walter blowout investigation report was delayed because the fire damaged key pieces of equipment and rig records that investigators needed to analyze. He also said an independent third-party investigation, commissioned by Walter Oil & Gas, had to come out first.

But that independent report written by Bourgoyne Engineering of Baton Rouge was completed in August 2014, and the government report closely tracks Bourgoyne's findings from a year earlier.

Cynthia Sarthou of the Gulf Restoration Network questioned the delay in completing the official government investigation.

"If you can't complete the investigation, your witnesses disappear, your evidence deteriorates, so it's harder and harder to determine what happened, who was at fault and what should be done about it," she said.

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