

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010

Remarks Following a Tour of Theodore Industrial Port and an Exchange With Reporters in Theodore, Alabama

June 14, 2010

The President. Good afternoon, everybody. I just had to—a chance to tour this staging facility here at Theodore along with Admiral Allen and Governor Riley. I also want to acknowledge that Congressman Jo Bonner and a number of our elected officials are here, and they just received an extensive briefing about what is taking place.

It is from this staging area and 16 others like it all across the Gulf Coast that our response to the oil spill is being carried out. Now, I saw, and many of you had an opportunity to see, what is being done to repair and decontaminate boom, to train volunteers, and to help with the cleanup efforts. And their hard work and their sense of purpose on behalf of the people of Alabama as well as the Gulf Coast is inspiring.

I had a chance during the discussions with the State and local officials to reiterate to them what I've been saying all across the coast, and that is that we want to coordinate at every level—Federal, State, and local—to make sure that we are leaving no stone unturned in terms of our ability to respond to this crisis.

Now, what I've heard from a number of local officials during my trip today is what I've heard from folks on each of the four visits that I've made to this region since the Deepwater Horizon explosion happened in April. There's a sense that this disaster is not only threatening our fishermen and our shrimpers and our oystermen, not only affecting potentially precious marshes and wetlands and estuaries and waters that are part of what makes the Gulf Coast so special, there's also a fear that it can have a long-term impact on a way of life that has been passed on for generations.

And I understand that fear. The leaders and the officials who are with me understand it. Governor Riley understands it. He has been a regular presence on our daily coordinating calls and a relentless advocate for Alabama throughout this process. And we are absolutely committed to working with him and all the local officials who are behind us to do everything in our power to protect the Gulf way of life so that it's there for our children and our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren.

Now, everybody here has had experiences dealing with disasters. As we were flying over from Mississippi via helicopter, you could see the footprints of buildings that had been decimated from Katrina. But in some ways, what we're dealing with here is unique because it's not simply one catastrophic event, it's an ongoing assault whose movements are constantly changing. That's what makes this crisis so challenging. It means that it has to be constantly watched, it has to be tracked. We're constantly having to redeploy resources to make sure that they're having maximum impact. And we also need to make sure that we are constantly helping folks who have been hurt by it, even as we're stopping the oil from spreading into more and more areas.

So that means that this response effort has to happen on a bunch of different tracks. It means containing as much of the oil as we can as quick as we can. After seeing an initial oil collection plan from BP, we went back to them and said that they need to move faster and more aggressively. And they have now come back with a plan to accelerate steps to contain

over 50,000 barrels a day by the end of June, 2 weeks earlier than they had originally suggested. Their revised plan also includes steps to better prepare against extreme weather events and other unforeseen circumstances in the months ahead, addressing another one of our concerns. And we're going to continue to hold BP and any other responsible parties accountable for the disaster that they created.

Dealing with the aftermath of this spill also means protecting the health and safety of the folks who live and work here in Theodore, here in Alabama, and here on the Gulf Coast. As part of this effort, I'm announcing a comprehensive, coordinated, and multiagency initiative to ensure that seafood from the Gulf of Mexico is safe to eat. Now, I had some of that seafood for lunch, and it was delicious. But we want to make sure that the food industry down here, as much as possible, is getting the protection and the certification that they need to continue their businesses. So this is important for consumers who need to know that their food is safe, but it's also important for the fishermen and processors who need to be able to sell their products with confidence.

So let me be clear: Seafood from the Gulf today is safe to eat, but we need to make sure that it stays that way. And that's why, beyond closing off waters that have been or are likely to be exposed to oil, the FDA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration are increasing inspections of seafood processors, strengthening surveillance programs, and monitoring fish that are caught just outside of restricted areas. And we're also coordinating our efforts with the States, which are implementing similar plans.

These safety measures are on top of steps that we've taken to protect workers who are involved in the cleanup efforts. And part of the training that you observed here today involves making sure that workers are sticking to the protocols that are put in place so that when they are out there on the waters or here on land working with potentially toxic materials, that they're taking that seriously and that they're not cutting corners on safety, because we don't want tragedies on top of the tragedy that we're already seeing.

Officials from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration are inspecting all the staging areas like this one. They're boarding vessels off the coast to make sure that BP is complying with its safety obligations. If they see a problem, they'll work with BP to resolve it as quickly as possible. And we're also monitoring air and water across the Gulf Coast for hazardous chemicals and pollutants that could endanger oil spill workers or anybody else, so we can act swiftly should any health risks arise.

Now, these health and safety measures are just part of our overall effort to deal with the spill. All in all, we are confronting the largest environmental disaster in our history with the largest environmental response and recovery effort in our history. Over 27,000 personnel are working to safeguard our coasts and protect endangered wildlife. More than 5,400 skimmers, tugs, barges, and other vessels, some of which you saw as we came into this facility, are currently responding to the spill. Over 2 million feet of containment boom and over 3 million feet of absorbent boom are being used to contain the spill, and millions of more feet are available.

In addition, we have authorized the deployment of 17,500 National Guards men and women to assist in the response effort. So far, only about 1,600 have been activated, and the rest stand ready to help whenever our Governors choose to call on them.

Across the Gulf Coast, guardsmen are supporting local, State, and Federal authorities in a number of ways, from reconnaissance to hazardous material training. Guard aircraft are also

assisting in the response and helping to coordinate the vessels that are out on the water. Here in Alabama in particular, about 200 of the roughly 450 guardsmen who've been activated have received specialized training to assist BP with claims processing. So put simply, this is a multipurpose force that's prepared to handle almost any challenge, and I hope our Governors put them to good use.

So the full resources of our Government are being mobilized to confront this disaster. But it's not only important for everyone from the Federal Government on down to do all we can, it's also important for us to work together to make sure our efforts are well-coordinated. That's why Governor Riley and the other Gulf Coast Governors have been on a daily call with my administration, 7 days a week, since this disaster occurred. That's why we're going to continue to work hand in hand with State and local authorities on every front, from containing as much oil as possible to protecting our coasts, until we put this tragic ordeal behind us.

Now, I can't promise folks here in Theodore or across the Gulf Coast that the oil will be cleaned up overnight; it will not be. It's going to take time for things to return to normal. There's going to be a harmful effect on many local businesses, and it's going to be painful for a lot of folks. Folks are going to be frustrated, and some folks are going to be angry. But I promise you this: That things are going to return to normal. This region that's known a lot of hardship will bounce back, just like it's bounced back before. We are going to do everything we can, 24/7, to make sure that communities get back on their feet. And in the end, I am confident that we're going to be able to leave the Gulf Coast in better shape than it was before.

So, Governor Riley, I appreciate all your efforts. To all the local officials here who've been working so hard, we appreciate what you do each and every day.

And let me just make one last comment about our Coast Guard and about our national incident coordinator, Thad Allen. Thad Allen was about to retire, and he has answered the call on behalf of this country and is working as hard as anybody in this country right now to help deal with this crisis. Members of the Coast Guard have been doing outstanding work each and every day, and so I just want to say to all of them that the country is proud of you, grateful to you. Keep up the good work.

All right. Thank you very much, everybody.

President's Meeting With British Petroleum Chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg

Q. Mr. President—[inaudible]?

The President. I want to take this one question because there's been some reports in the news. I'm going to be meeting with the BP chairman and a number of officials on Wednesday. We have begun preliminary conversations about how do we structure a mechanism so that the legitimate claims that are going to be presented, not just tomorrow, not just next week, but over the coming months, are dealt with justly, fairly, promptly.

So far, we've had a constructive conversation, and my hope is, is that by the time the chairman and I meet on Wednesday, that we've made sufficient progress, that we can start actually seeing a structure that would be in place. But it's too early now at this point, Major [Major Garrett, FOX News], for me to make an announcement. By Wednesday, though, my hope is, is that we've made some progress on this front.

All right?

Oil Spill Skimming Equipment and Vessels

Q. Mr. President—[inaudible]?

The President. I'm going to let Thad Allen, who's the national incident coordinator, address this very quickly because we talked about it during our meeting.

Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill National Incident Commander Thad W. Allen. First of all, we have a number of different types of skimming equipment. Some are offshore deep-draft vessels; the skimming equipment is organically built into it. We have other skimming arrays that are towed with boom systems, and we have shallow water skimmers that are deployed inshore. They become the major resource of effectiveness to try and fight this battle offshore, and we know what we're doing near the wellhead. We have to push the enemy, if you will, back 20 or 30 miles offshore and do maximum skimming there.

We have over 400 of those skimming vessels that are actually organically contained skimming equipment. Our goal is to take the smaller equipment that's flexible, put it on vessels of opportunity, and then coordinate better with our local, State partners, including National Guard overflights, local fishermen's associations, and so forth, mass our effect and get it pointed up with a command and control system that can attack it on all levels.

The President. All right.

Oil Spill Skimming Equipment and Vessels

Q. What about those vessels of opportunity? There are a lot of local fishermen that say they're not being—

The President. This is an issue—and you're only going to get two questions. This is an issue that's come up across the Gulf. Keep in mind what we're talking about with vessels of opportunity—that could range from a big shrimp boat to just a little recreation boat that somebody has brought up.

So each of them is going to have different capacity. Some of them are going to be able to take skimming equipment of the sort that Admiral Allen discussed and actually place it on the boat. Some of them aren't going to have that capacity, but maybe they can act as sentinels to spot oil or maybe some of them are just shuttling supplies back and forth to these ships.

So what we're doing now is we're taking inventory of all the vessels that have presented themselves to determine which ones can go out in deep water—they've got radio, they've got full equipment, they can actually lay out boom, they can engage in skimming—which ones aren't able to do that, and that process is going to be coordinated. But keep in mind, we've got to do this across four States. And what that means is, is that at any given time, as Thad indicated, the priority might be, we just want to get some stuff out 20 miles before it starts coming in closer, which means you're not going to see necessarily a lot of skimmers close in because every resource that we have is being deployed further out.

But one of the key points that we made with the regional incident commander is we've got to make sure that we've got a full inventory, we know exactly what the capacity of each of these boats are, we've made sure that people are being trained, and we're matched up folks who are trained with these vessels, and we start actually putting them to work as quickly as possible.

All right?

Gulf Coast Region Beaches

Q. [Inaudible]

The President. Well, look, I've seen a number of beautiful beaches. I saw some in Mississippi. We saw some beaches flying over. But I'll be honest with you: That we're going to stop as much of the oil from coming in as possible. That's our number-one job.

It turns out that if the oil hits the beaches, that's actually probably the easiest to clean up. So it's a concern obviously for tourism, it's a concern for an entire Gulf region that economically depends on the tourist season and this period of time when people are out of school. But those beaches will recover because those big globs of oil, when they hit the beaches, we can send a bunch of people out there and scoop them up, dispose of it properly, and those beaches will look pretty pristine a year or 2 years from now.

The biggest concern we have actually are the marshes, the estuaries, the wetlands, where if you start seeing that oil seeping in, that not only can kill oyster beds and other vitally important seafood and ecosystems, but even the repair efforts in those areas can actually destroy the ecology in the region.

So we're having to coordinate with the best scientists we've got available. Thad Allen is working with NOAA and all the other agencies to make sure that we are grading priorities in terms of areas that have to be protected first and foremost because they may have the most difficult time to recover. And that means that sometimes—for example, in Mississippi, where I just came from, they just made a decision they're not putting any boom in front of the beaches, because the fact of the matter is, if the oil hits there, it's bad, but it's temporary, whereas in some of these other areas it could end up being permanent.

All right? Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:05 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Robert R. Riley of Alabama; Gov. Charles J. Crist, Jr., of Florida; Gov. Piyush "Bobby" Jindal of Louisiana; Gov. Haley R. Barbour of Mississippi; and Capt. Steven D. Poulin, USCG, commanding officer, Sector Mobile. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

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