



The BP blowout: What the evidence reveals

by Dave Fehling/11 News

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HOUSTON -- The report BP released on its website Wednesday morning is the company's version of the events that led to the Deepwater Horizon blowout, but the 11 News I-Team has been sifting through evidence gathered by a more objective source.

That is the Deepwater Horizon Joint Investigation, the ongoing effort by the U.S. Coast Guard and the new Bureau of Ocean Energy, Management and Enforcement (BOEMRE).

For months now, Houston-based employees have been grilled by government investigators in sometimes tense exchanges. There have been hundreds of hours of testimony given and thousands of pages of internal documents and e-mails gathered. Some of the testimony has been dramatic, some of the documents revealing, but does any of it yet show one clear-cut cause, a "smoking gun?"

Congressman Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) was quick to pounce on one e-mail that he said showed BP's corporate attitude to "cut corner after corner" to save time and money -- proof, he said, of what led to the disaster.

Written by BP engineer Brett Cocalles in Houston just four days before the rig exploded, the e-mail is about the debate they were having over what some say were shortcuts taken in drilling the well.

Cocalles wrote: "But who cares, it's done, end of story, will probably be fine and we'll get a good cement job."

In testimony, August 27th, Cocalles told investigators, "I did write: but who cares, it's done, end of story."

But far from proof of a "who cares" attitude, Cocalles's lawyer, Philip Hilder, told the 11

News I-Team that the e-mail was taken out of context. He said it "in no way is reflective of BP's attitude toward risk," and was simply the engineer's comments on a carefully calculated decision.

"I don't think it's a smoking gun," said Dan Pickering, a former engineer and now industry analyst with Pickering, Tudor Pickering Holt & Co. Securities.

Pickering has closely monitored the testimony and said what is more revealing is found in the other details about how BP designed the well, how Transocean operated the rig, and how Halliburton did the "cement job."

"The well design looks to us like it had an error, and the well implementation had errors, and it still points towards BP than anyone else," he said.

BP used contractors to do much of the work and has tried to show they share the liability for what went wrong.

One of the most contentious issues involved the "cement job" and it was brought out during the testimony of David Sims, BP's drilling operations manager.

Sims was under questioning by Halliburton's attorney, Don Godwin, who at one point looked sternly at Sims and said, "You know you're sitting here telling a lie."

BP's attorney, Ed Castaing, sitting next to Sims, shot back, "Your honor, I know he doesn't think this witness is lying, this is grandstanding. "

Godwin: "No it's not. "

Castaing: "Yes it is."

The heated exchange may be an indication of how close the testimony was getting to a critical issue in what caused the blowout: contractor Halliburton was doing the cementing of the well so the pipe wouldn't leak. Testimony showed there were arguments over the decision by BP to use fewer devices called "centralizers." The centralizers were supposed to keep the pipe in the middle of the wellbore so methane gas wouldn't leak up to the rig, where it can -- and in this case did -- explode.

"It became clear in the testimony that Halliburton was pretty strenuously arguing for more centralizers, more safety equipment," analyst Dan Pickering told the 11 News I-Team.

But one piece of critical evidence that has yet to be scrutinized: the massive device called the BOP, the blowout preventer that was designed to shut off the well in an emergency, so it wouldn't leak any oil.

But it didn't work and there's been conflicting testimony about whether it was maintained properly by Transocean or if rig workers tried to activate it too late.

Just this past weekend, crews lifted the BOP from the Gulf floor. It will be kept under high security at a NASA facility in Louisiana, where experts will carefully tear it apart. What they find could be the other crucial piece of evidence as to why the emergency device couldn't stop the catastrophic release of oil and gas once the rig workers lost control of the well.

"That mystery should get less mysterious, but there is some probability that it's gone through so much damage it won't tell us much," said Pickering.

In the end, he said the courts may decide who's responsible financially, but technically, he said we may never know exactly what led to the world's worst offshore oil leak.