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BP engineer defends decision on cement job

By TOM FOWLER and BRETT CLANTON Copyright 2010 Houston Chronicle
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A BP drilling engineer said Friday he doesn't believe a much-scrutinized decision about the Macondo well's cement job posed a threat to the safety of the crew aboard the Deepwater Horizon rig.

During testimony before an investigatory panel, Brett Cocalles said the fact that the well had been drilled straight figured in the decision to use six devices to center its pipelike production casing instead of 21.

"It's one of the straightest holes I've seen, actually," Cocalles told the joint investigative panel of the Coast Guard and the Interior Department's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement, which held public hearings in Houston all week.

It is investigating the April 20 blowout that killed 11 workers on the Deepwater Horizon and triggered a huge oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

The hearings will resume Oct. 4, either in Houston or New Orleans, where the panel took three previous rounds of testimony.

According to earlier testimony, Halliburton Co. workers warned BP engineers five days before the blowout about the potential for a "severe gas flow problem" in the well if the additional centralizers were not added.

But Cocalles and several other BP engineers have said they did not see such a warning in any reports.

In an April 16 e-mail, Cocalles had downplayed the risk of sticking with the six centralizers already installed, writing "who cares, it's done, end of story, will probably be fine."

During testimony Friday he characterized that as an expression of his frustration over days of back-and-forth discussion about the centralizer issue.

"It was about, it's time to stop debating what the model says," he told the panel, because his supervisor — John Guide - already had made the decision.

Under questioning by his lawyer, Philip Hilder, Cocalles also countered an assertion during testimony earlier in the week by Halliburton cementer Jesse Gagliano, who said he recommended 21 centralizers.

Cocalles said that figure was used in a computer model of cementing plans because there were already six centralizers on the rig and BP could only get another 15 out to the rig in short order.

'Pros and cons'

Hilder also asked Cocalles about a comment he made in one of his e-mails about the "risk/reward" balance between going with 21 centralizers versus six.

Congressional investigators have suggested the decision may have been motivated by BP's desire to finish a well that was weeks behind schedule and millions of dollars over budget.

"It is a term that refers to economics?" Hilder asked.

No, Cocalis said. "It's a term I've used for years, saying what are the pros and cons of a decision."

Fifth Amendment

Also on Friday, a third BP engineer declined to testify. Through his lawyer, Mitch Lansden, drilling engineer Mark Hafle invoked his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination.

Two other engineers previously have invoked the Fifth Amendment in declining to appear before the panel.

"Mark Hafle is an honorable and decent man and a fine engineer. He has done nothing wrong," Lansden said.

"I have advised him to exercise his constitutional rights to decline to answer questions at this particular hearing at this particular time as the most reasonable legal strategy given the number, variety and complexity of ongoing investigations."

BP said in a statement it is continuing to cooperate in the investigation and that workers' decisions not to testify were made on their own.

Some observers had expected Cocalis to decline to testify as well, but Hilder said his client felt the need to straighten out misconceptions.

'A risk to testifying'

"His e-mail was liberally used in congressional hearings to put his actions in a negative light," Hilder said after the hearing.

"I know there's always a risk to testifying and there was a lot of anxiety before the hearing, but I think the committee heard his explanation," he said.

Thanks for showing up

Coast Guard Capt. Hung Nguyen, co-chairman of the investigating board, thanked Cocalis for testifying.

"You're a very brave man for showing up today," Nguyen said.

Sharon Hong contributed to this report.

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