Oil Boom Manufacturing Experiencing Unfortunate Boom

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CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Nearly a mile of newly made oil-containment boom, which provides a final and desperate line of defense against an enormous slick in the Gulf of Mexico, gets trucked out of a small factory in Cape Canaveral each day.

"We're maxed out," said Sean Geary, sales manager at American Boom & Barrier Corp. "I've probably turned down 300,000 feet of orders."

Ever since the Deepwater Horizon offshore drilling rig exploded and sank more than three weeks ago, boommanufacturers have struggled to catch up in what amounts to the biggest boom in booms ever.

Along west Florida shores, orange or yellow booms have become the most visible sign of preparedness for what is now the nation's biggest and still-growing oil spill from an offshore rig.

The rig's blown-out oil well has been gushing an estimated 210,000 gallons of crude each day into the Gulf of Mexico about 45 miles southeast of Louisiana. Relatively small amounts of oil have fouled the shores of that state and Alabama, and Florida is on high alert.

"It all hit really quick," Geary said, referring to efforts by the well's owner, BP PLC, and by pollution-control contractors and government agencies to find available boom as quickly as possible and anywhere in the world.

The rig sank April 22, leaking oil was confirmed two days later, and by the end of the following day, about 21,000 feet of boom had been installed. From then on, demand for boom has soared.

This week, for example, three massive Air Force cargo jets — C-17 Globemasters — rumbled out of an Alaska base to deliver booms to crews in Louisiana.

"We essentially have a very large boom airlift under way," said Doug Suttles, BP's chief operating officer. "We already have 1.2 million feet of boom in the water, which is by far the largest boom deployment ever."

"We have another 400,000 feet staged at the staging locations. We have another 2.3 million feet on order and being delivered as we speak. This boom is coming from places like Norway, Brazil, Mexico and Alaska," Suttles said.

That 1.2 million feet of boom already deployed is enough to extend from Pensacola to St. George Island, a span that takes in nearly all of the Panhandle's famed sugar-

sand beaches. The 2.3 million feet of boom on order would cover the rest of Florida's Gulf Coast, stopping short of the Keys.

But the biggest share of boom is in place or destined for Louisiana. Florida has about 170,000 feet of boom, floating in waters along wetlands, sea-grass beds and some beaches. Another 40,000 feet of booms are on standby.

Pushed by federal authorities to prevent oil from hitting land, BP's strategy has been to douse crude with chemical dispersants, light it on fire when possible and skim up floating blobs with specially equipped boats.

BP has failed repeatedly to plug or contain leaks from the well's damaged plumbing a mile under the sea. The company is now trying to place a "top hat" dome and pipe over the biggest leak to funnel crude oil to vessels on the surface.

Mike Sole, secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, said the best choice in many cases is to have containment boom ready rather than already anchored in waterways.

"Booms can actually cause damage to the environment," Sole said, describing conditions in which high winds rip booms free and drag them through sensitive ecosystems. "You don't want to deploy boom too early."

That hasn't dampened demand for a piece of equipment that amounts to a durable plastic curtain that floats because of a 7-inch tube of foam attached to its top and hangs vertically in the water because of heavy chain attached at the bottom. All those materials are in short supply now.

The 34-year-old American Boom & Barrier Corp. has ramped up from 10 employees, working in a single, eight-hour shift, to nearly 30 employees working in two, 10-hour shifts. They use heat-welding equipment to fabricate nearly 5,000 feet of boom each day.

The booms are made in 100-foot sections that fold accordionlike into 7-foot bundles, weighing 220 pounds and costing $850.

"I could get another shop going to produce double what I'm producing now, and we still wouldn't be able to keep up with it," said company Vice President Nick Naayers. "It's that crazy right now. We could put up 10 more shops, and it wouldn't be enough boom to put out there."

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