BP takes Gulf oil spill heat, but what about other companies?

BP accepts responsibility for the massive Gulf oil spill, making it a lightning rod for public rebuke. But other companies, including Transocean and Halliburton, may be legally liable, too.

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"It will be the contract law fight of all contract law fights," Henning said.

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While legal judgments are yet to be determined, says Plater, "My guess is there will be a lot of pointing of fingers."

The blame game has already begun.

Officials from BP, Transocean, and Halliburton testified before Congress on May 11. Three days later, President Obama called those hearings a "ridiculous spectacle."

"You had executives of BP and Transocean and Halliburton falling over each other to point the finger of blame at somebody else," said Mr. Obama in a May 14 speech.

Henning and Plater each say they're not surprised that the other companies are keeping a low profile for the time being, letting BP become the face of the Gulf spill.

'A gathering storm of litigation'

"Their first reaction, of course, is self defense," Plater said. "I'm sure they're delighted BP is in the crosshairs, but they also know there is a gathering storm of litigation on the way."

Additionally, "they're not going to be able to duck [public scrutiny]," he said. "It's just postponed.... It will be a top story for months, if not longer."

According to BP spokeswoman Heidi Feick, the question of other companies stepping forward has not been discussed at BP. Their focus is on ending the spill and cleaning it up, she said.

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During its congressional testimony last month, Halliburton said it accepts no blame for the spill. That's Transocean's position as well, according to a spokesman.

Inevitably, Henning said “BP will happily name everyone who was involved,” but in the meantime, BP will likely continue to act as a magnet for the blame, because continuing to point fingers before the oil stops flowing and cleanup is further along would damage BP’s already-sullied image.

“The court of public opinion isn’t fair; the media is not fair,” he said, adding that BP was the most recognizable name and easiest to blame immediately after the disaster began. “But whether it’s fair or not, [BP] will have to live with it.”

The blame will be sorted out through litigation, Henning said, but it will be a drawn out process likely lasting a decade or more.

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