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BP Chief Expresses Contrition to House Panel

By [JOHN M. BRODER](#) and [LIZ ROBBINS](#)

WASHINGTON — BP’s embattled chief executive, [Tony Hayward](#), told Congress on Thursday that the [oil](#) disaster in the Gulf of Mexico “never should have happened, and I am deeply sorry that it did,” as he tried to demonstrate that he and the oil giant understood the huge scale of the spill’s environmental, economic and human toll.

Mr. Hayward has faced withering criticism for his company’s response to the spill, and for the first time he was forced publicly to defend his comments and his company’s actions under mainly harsh questioning from members of a subcommittee of the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

After several critical opening statements by subcommittee members, followed by the removal of a shouting protestor, Mr. Hayward read aloud his prepared remarks of contrition. Then, following a short recess, he began responding to members in a soft, deliberate manner, often by sidestepping questions about specific details of BP’s actions in drilling the well and in the fatal explosion and fire on the drilling rig April 20 that left the well spewing oil into the gulf.

“I think it’s too early to reach conclusions,” Mr. Hayward said to Representative [Bart Stupak](#), Democrat of Michigan and chairman of the oversight and investigations subcommittee. “The investigations are ongoing.”

Mr. Hayward declined to directly answer Mr. Stupak’s question about whether companies with poor safety records should be allowed to continue to operate in the

United States. Instead he replied: “We’ve engaged in systematic change at BP over the past three years. We have begun to change the culture. I’m not denying there’s more to do.”

And when Mr. Stupak asked if Mr. Hayward expected to be chief executive much longer, Mr. Hayward dodged the question, answering: “At the moment, I am focused on the response.”

Similarly, members who grilled Mr. Hayward about BP’s actions before the disaster got few direct answers.

Mr. Hayward said he knew nothing about the well until shortly before the rig explosion, when he was told that it had successfully struck oil, and that he had had no part in the engineering decisions that may have led to the accident.

Representative [Henry A. Waxman](#), chairman of the full Energy and Commerce Committee, accused him of “stonewalling” the committee by refusing to get into specifics about well design and engineering practices.

“I’m not stonewalling,” Mr. Hayward said. “I simply wasn’t involved in the decision-making.”

Mr. Waxman produced documents showing a debate among BP engineers on how to complete the well, with warnings that the plan to install a certain type of liner would increase the risk of a blowout and probably violate federal safety regulations.

“Clearly there was a discussion among the engineering team,” Mr. Hayward said. “Clearly an engineering judgment was taken.”

Under questioning from Representative Michael C. Burgess, Republican of Texas, Mr. Hayward said he had never heard of any of the problems with what one BP official described as the “nightmare well” in the Gulf of Mexico.

“I had no prior knowledge of the drilling of this well, none whatsoever,” he said. “With respect, sir, we drill hundreds of wells a year around the world.”

Mr. Burgess shot back, “That’s what’s scaring me now.”

The direct questioning from members of Congress took on an even sharper tone than their opening statements, as emotions were running high in the chambers.

Even before Mr. Hayward could speak on Thursday, one woman with dark paint under her eyes and smothered over her hands to look like oil started yelling at Mr. Hayward, saying that he needed to be charged with a crime.

After about two minutes, she was subdued by police officers, taken from the room and Mr. Hayward began his prepared remarks.

He offered deep contrition, but few answers to the pressing questions stemming from the explosion aboard the Deepwater Horizon offshore rig, and the two-month oil spill.

“How could this happen?” Mr. Hayward read. “How damaging is the spill to the environment? Why is it taking so long to stop the flow of oil and gas into the Gulf?”

He went on to say: “We don’t yet have answers to all these important questions.”

He called the spill a tragedy, and said that when he learned that 11 workers died in the explosion and fire on the Deepwater Horizon, “I was personally devastated.”

For more than an hour, Mr. Hayward sat through opening statements from committee members that were more like political salvos.

He later told the committee that BP’s efforts to stop the leak and contain the oil were continuing on two fronts: drilling of two relief wells should be completed by August, he said, and the two containment devices were successfully capturing some of the oil erupting from the well.

A spokesman for BP, Brian Ferguson, said that according to Adm. [Thad W. Allen](#), the national incident commander, the relief wells were “weeks ahead of schedule.” On Thursday, BP had been able to capture 14, 750 barrels of crude oil.

Oil is spewing out of the damaged well at a rate as high as 60,000 barrels per day, and live streaming video of the gushing emissions have projected a disconcerting view of BP’s halting process to contain the flow.

The focus for one morning and afternoon, at least, shifted to Washington.

Mr. Waxman assailed BP’s “corporate complacency” In his opening statement. He said the committee searched 30,000 BP documents in vain looking for evidence of attention to the risks of the Macondo well.

“There is not a single e-mail or document that shows you paid even the slightest attention to the dangers at the well,” Mr. Waxman said.

“BP’s corporate complacency is astonishing,” he added. “BP cut corner after corner to save a million dollars here and a few hours or days there. And now the whole Gulf Coast is paying the price.”

Rep. Joe Barton of Texas, the senior Republican on the committee, criticized the White House’s brokering the \$20 billion fund as a “shakedown,” and apologized to Mr. Hayward for what he called the politicization of the crisis.

Mr. Barton said he was “ashamed” of the meeting at the White House on Wednesday, at which top BP officials pledged to set aside \$20 billion to pay future economic and environmental claims.

Representative Ed Markey, who chairs the House Committee for Energy Independence and [Global Warming](#), said he disagreed strongly with Mr. Barton’s characterization of a “shakedown,” adding that it was the government’s right to protect its “most vulnerable citizens.”

Later, [Robert Gibbs](#), the White House press secretary, responded to Rep. Barton’s remarks.

“What is shameful is that Joe Barton seems to have more concern for big corporations that caused this disaster than the fishermen, small business owners and communities whose lives have been devastated by the destruction,” Mr. Gibbs said in a statement. “Congressman Barton may think that a fund to compensate these Americans is a ‘tragedy’, but most Americans know that the real tragedy is what the men and women of the Gulf Coast are going through right now. Members from both parties should repudiate his comments.”

Mr. Hayward sat mostly expressionless, writing notes as committee members took turns delivering their statements and political salvos.

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Mr. Hayward’s appearance before the Congressional panel comes one day after [President Obama](#) announced that BP would create a \$20 billion fund to pay damage claims to thousands of fishermen and others along the Gulf Coast. BP also said it would suspend dividend payments to shareholders.

“We will pay all necessary cleanup costs,” Mr. Hayward assured members of Congress on Thursday.

John M. Broder reported from Washington; Liz Robbins reported from New York.

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