LexisNexis®

SHOW: Morning Edition 10:00 AM EST NPR

October 29, 2010 Friday

LENGTH: 625 words

HEADLINE: Cement Tests Should Have Raised Doubts

BODY:

MARY LOUISE KELLY, host:

Okay. To another story now, investigators say Halliburton may share some of the blame for the BP **oil** well blowout this past spring. That news sent Halliburton shares down sharply yesterday. BP's stock went up. Halliburton mixed the cement that was used in BP's well and investigators say tests conducted before the blowout should have raised questions for both companies. NPR's Jeff Brady reports.

JEFF BRADY: Halliburton's cement job came under scrutiny soon after BP's Macondo well exploded on April 20th, killing 11 workers and eventually spilling 4 million barrels of **oil** into the Gulf. Yesterday's letter from investigators to the National **Oil** Spill Commission is the first finding into what may have caused the tragedy.

Professor WILLIAM FLECKENSTEIN (Colorado School of Mines): The fog is starting to lift as far as what actually occurred out there.

BRADY: Will Fleckenstein is a **petroleum** engineering professor at Colorado School of Mines. He says the cement Halliburton pumped into the well is really a foam with tiny bubbles.

Mr. FLECKENSTEIN: What you're trying to achieve with the foam cement is similar to like a honeycomb that you would have in a beehive.

BRADY: If that mixture is good, it creates a stable foam seal around the pipe in the well to keep the **oil** and gas from escaping. But if the mixture is off just a little bit, the foam becomes unstable and that honeycomb collapses. That's why testing the cement beforehand is very important.

Investigators with the **oil** spill commission will lay out what they've learned at a two-day hearing in Washington, starting November 8th. But in their letter, they said four tests were conducted before the well blowout. Only one was successful. **Gene Beck** is a practicing **drilling** engineer and on the faculty at **Texas A&M** University.

Mr. **GENE BECK (Texas A&M** University): You might have a series of failures which are indicating that you need to make adjustments to the slurry that gets pumped, but ultimately, the important test is the one that passes.

BRADY: After the accident, the investigators asked Chevron, which played no role in the well blowout, to test a nearly identical mixture in the company's well-respected cementing facility. Chevron said after nine tries, its lab personnel were not able to create a stable foam cement.

Gene Beck with Texas A&M says that raises questions about the one successful test Halliburton says it conducted.

Mr. BECK: It is a little - more than a little bit of a concern that they weren't able to duplicate the test in an independent laboratory.

BRADY: In a written statement, Halliburton says the cement materials supplied to Chevron may be different than what was on the **drilling** rig and that would explain the problem Chevron had duplicating its tests. Halliburton says more study is needed to know that for sure.

Halliburton has argued in the past that it's done this sort of cement work on hundreds of jobs. The company has pointed to BP's well design and operations as a more likely culprit in the blowout. And investigators with the **oil** spill commission were careful in their letter, to warn against laying all the blame on Halliburton's cement job.

Mr. BECK: Cement jobs of this kind are often unsuccessful.

BRADY: **Gene Beck with Texas A&M** University, says there are backup procedures so that if a cementing job fails, crews can identify and fix the problem. Halliburton says BP failed to conduct some of those tests, and in the end, BP was the operator of the well and responsible for everything that happened there.

But it's becoming clear, more than one failure may have led to the largest offshore **oil** spill in U.S. history and BP may not have to share the blame or face the lawsuits from this tragedy alone. Jeff Brady, NPR News.

LOAD-DATE: November 1, 2010