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Obama Looking for 'Ass to Kick' for Oil Spill

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WASHINGTON -- President Barack Obama says his talks with Gulf fishermen and oil spill experts are not an academic exercise. They're "so I know whose ass to kick."

One target for the presidential foot: Tony Hayward, the embattled chief executive of BP.

Obama was asked by Matt Lauer of NBC's "Today" about Hayward's past comments that "I want my life back," that the Gulf was "a big ocean" and that "the environmental impact of this disaster is likely to be very, very modest."

"He wouldn't be working for me after any of those statements," Obama said, according to excerpts released by NBC.

The interview was to air Tuesday. NBC aired portions and put out some excerpts Monday night.

It was part of a stepped-up White House effort to show Obama is actively engaged in dealing with the worst oil spill in the nation's history, and to distance itself from the London-based oil giant, formerly known as British Petroleum. Polls have shown a majority of Americans believe Obama has handled the crisis poorly.

The administration isn't even using the same figures as BP any more for how much oil is flowing from the blown-out well and how much is being captured.

Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen told a White House briefing Monday that a cap on the damaged oil well is now keeping up to 462,000 gallons of oil a day from leaking into the Gulf, up sharply from previous amounts.

But his figures conflicted slightly with BP's numbers. In a statement, BP put the amount being captured at 466,200 gallons. Allen said the government was using its own flow-rate calculations and no longer wanted to rely on those from BP.

Obama met Monday with his Cabinet and Allen for a briefing on the oil spill, which began April 20 with an explosion and fire that killed 11 workers on a BP-leased rig.

In remarks after that meeting, Obama sought to reassure the nation that the Gulf Coast would "bounce back" from the spill -- but not without time, effort and reimbursement from BP. BP is the majority owner of the oil well that blew, but other energy companies are also partners and will bear proportionate financial responsibility.

Obama stepped up his rhetoric with NBC's Lauer while on a trip to Kalamazoo, Mich., to deliver a high-school commencement address.

He strongly defended his role in dealing with the crisis, including his three visits to the region since the spill began.

"I was down there a month ago before most of these talking heads were even paying attention to the Gulf," Obama said.

Obama said he has talked to a variety of "experts" on the oil spill in addition to the fishermen.

"I don't sit around just talking to experts because this is a college seminar, we talk to these folks because they potentially have the best answers -- so I know whose ass to kick," the president said.

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