BP safety focus is crucial

Turnaround depends on reducing its risks, fixing U.S. troubles

By Matthew Dalton

BP PLC is hoping to reach operational health in 2008, but questions remain about whether problems within U.S. operations could undermine its turnaround.

The oil giant's two largest U.S. refineries and its oil field at Prudhoe Bay in Alaska are both expected to operate at capacity for most of the year for the first time since 2004.

But the main issue isn't whether the London-based company has fixed problems that several investigators said caused a deadly March 2005 explosion at its refinery in Texas City, Texas. The question is whether BP has diminished the risk that it might face a repeat explosion at Texas City, refinery, or at one of its main competitors, or that it might face a repeat of the explosion in Alaska.

"I've never seen anything that bad," said Carolyn Merritt, former chairman of the U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board, a federal agency.

"BP should be responding to things that other companies would have seen long ago," she said. "I think that's not happening." The company has said that refinery in Alaska, which has been the site of accidents in the past, will operate at capacity for most of the year for the first time since 2004.

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