

OFFSHORE DISASTER:

The BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

On April 20, 2010, a British Petroleum (BP) offshore oil rig exploded, killing workers on the rig and spilling tens of thousands of barrels of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico. BP's Deepwater Horizon oil well, located 5,000 feet below the ocean's surface, is now leaking between 5,000 – 60,000 barrels (210, 000 – 2,520,000 gallons) of crude oil into Gulf Coast waters each day, with devastating consequences for Gulf Coast communities and the fragile wetlands, bayous, and coastal waters on which they depend. The spill, which is estimated to be more than 130 miles long and 70 miles wide, will impact the coastlines of Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida. The continuous stream of crude oil from BP's leaking well also threatens hundreds of species in the Gulf of Mexico, including critical habitat for endangered species, such as whales, sea turtles, and migratory birds. Unless BP's oil well is closed quickly, it will soon become more destructive than the Exxon Valdez, and will far exceed the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill that led to a moratorium on offshore drilling.

TIMELINE

- July 2007: A study of the Interior Department's Minerals Management Service (MMS) data reveals that offshore oil drilling projects are riddled with a history of accidents, fires and deaths as reported in *Drilling Contractor*.
- July 30, 2008: A top agency manager at MMS faces criminal charges for violating conflict of interest laws. The Interior Department begins investigating other conflicts of interest, and the revolving door between oil companies and former MMS and Interior employees.
- April 2009: The MMS gave BP a "categorical exclusion" from the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirement to prepare a detailed environmental impact statement for BP's drilling operation. The Washington Post reported that BP's exploration plan for the Deepwater Horizon rig stated that the prospect of an oil spill was "unlikely," and that "no mitigation measures other than those required by regulation and BP policy will be employed to avoid, diminish or eliminate potential impacts on environmental resources."
- March 31, 2010: President Obama unveils plans to open large swaths of U.S. coastal waters to oil and natural gas drilling
- April 2: In a speech in North Carolina, President Obama states that "It turns out, by the way, that oil rigs today generally don't cause spills. They are technologically very advanced. Even during Katrina, the spills didn't come from the oil rigs, they came from the refineries onshore."
- April 7: The Government Accountability Office reports that Department of Interior managers routinely "suppressed" critical findings on the safety of offshore drilling projects, including the likelihood of oil spills.
- April 20: BP's Deepwater Horizon exploratory oil drilling platform explodes in the Gulf of Mexico. Eleven workers are missing and presumed dead. Seven are critically injured.
- April 23: Coast Guard Rear Adm. Mary Landry says that no oil appears to be leaking from the undersea wellhead or at the water's surface.
- April 24: The Coast Guard reverses its earlier statement and estimates that BP's well is spilling 1,000 barrels (42,000 gallons) of oil per day into the Gulf of Mexico.
- April 24 and 25: High seas and turbulent weather prevent clean-up crews and response teams from reaching the spill site.
- April 27: Underwater robots are deployed to stop the flow of oil but are unsuccessful.

- April 28: The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association states that BP's well is spilling 5,000 barrels (210,000 gallons) per day into the Gulf of Mexico.
- April 29: Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal declares a state of emergency.
- April 30: Experts state in the *Wall Street Journal* that BP's oil well could be leaking up to 25,000 barrels (1,050,000 gallons) per day into the Gulf of Mexico.
- May 1: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service states that the spill will impact 20 National Wildlife Refuges, including Breton Island National Wildlife Refuge, the second oldest wildlife refuge in the country established by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1904.
- May 2: President Obama visits a Coast Guard station on the Louisiana coast. President Obama announces that BP will bear all costs of the oil spill
- May 3: Tony Hayward, BP Chief Executive, announces that BP is fully responsible for the cleanup and any "legitimate" claims from the spill
- May 3: Senator Robert Menendez introduces a bill to raise the economic damages liability cap from \$75 million to \$10 billion for oil companies such as BP.
- May 4: Senior BP Officials testify in Congress that the oil well could be leaking as much as 60,000 barrels (2,520,000 gallons) per day into the Gulf of Mexico.
- May 4: BP announces that it may need an additional three months to drill a relief well.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

The oil plume from BP's oil spill is expected to cause long term damage to the coastlines of Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida and irreversibly alter the Gulf Coast ecosystem. The Gulf Coast is home to pristine ecosystems and some of the nation's most prized wildlife refuges and conservation areas. The Gulf of Mexico provides habitat for hundreds of species, and each year, approximately five million migratory birds make their way through the region. According to *The Times-Picayune*, the threatened area is a vital wintering or resting spot for more than 70 percent of the nation's waterfowl including the brown pelican, Louisiana's state bird. In addition, many endangered species rely on Gulf waters, and fragile populations of North Atlantic bluefin tuna, four species of sea turtles, six whale species, sharks, and dolphins are in the spill's impact zone.

ECONOMIC IMPACTS

According to *Associated Press* reports, damages from the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill could exceed \$1 billion dollars. This disaster will undoubtedly exact a severe toll on the coastline industries that rely on Gulf Waters, such as Louisiana's oyster and shrimp harvest. Just in Louisiana alone, annual retail seafood sales are \$1.8 billion, recreational fishing generates approximately \$1 billion in retail sales, and saltwater sport fishing generates about \$757 million each year, in addition to the thousands of jobs supported by these industries.

THE SOLUTIONS

The BP Deepwater Disaster and other catastrophes like it are predictable outcomes of our reliance on fossil fuels. We must change course. Congress must act now to:

- Put stricter regulations in place for the coal and oil industries to make them safer and more accountable for the damage they do.
- Place a ban on new offshore drilling
- Pass legislation that jumpstarts a clean energy revolution in the U.S.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Help prevent another disaster by taking action to stop offshore drilling. The "drill, baby, drill" slogan of fossil fuel proponents must be replaced with the demand for clean energy. Visit <http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/news/gulf-oil-spill> today and tell your member of Congress to support a clean energy future.