

# FIVE YEARS AFTER DEEPWATER HORIZON, BIG OIL STILL EXPLOITING GULF COAST



The 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, pictured, has left a wake of destruction that could take the Gulf Coast decades to recover from—but the Obama administration has continued to approve fossil fuel drilling operations. (Photo: EPI20/flickr/cc)

Five years after the BP-operated Deepwater Horizon disaster killed 11 workers, devastated coastal communities, and spewed hundreds of million gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico, recovery in the region is very much ongoing—even as the fossil fuel industry continues its push to expand its dangerous operations.

Despite some restoration progress and new reforms to offshore drilling, such as increased safeguards for blowout preventers, "the Gulf continues to suffer from the impacts of the oil and gas industry and is vulnerable to future major drilling

disasters," writes Raleigh Hoke, communications director for the Gulf Restoration Network (GRN).

"My community and family live in dangerous conditions," said Brooks Frederick, an activist from Houma, Louisiana who joined a Rising Tide action in New York on Monday. "No matter how much PR and green washing they do, the industry does not care about communities. You cannot serve profits and communities at the same time. We deserve a better future."

Environmental and justice activists from Rising Tide gathered in New York on Monday morning to launch a week of action against the fossil fuel industry and to call on Governor Andrew Cuomo to reject a proposed natural gas facility on Long Island's Port Ambrose. Along the Gulf Coast, communities also rose up to call for justice from BP and commemorate the lives that were lost on the day of the explosion. Those actions were charted on Twitter under the hashtag #GulfSouthRising and #BP5.

The lingering effects of the Deepwater Horizon spill have continued to emerge over the years. Last October, researchers found that approximately 10 million gallons of oil congealed on the ocean floor around BP's Macondo well, where the initial explosion took place, forming a "bathtub ring" of pollution.

In Baratavia Bay, a string of islands that was one of the hardest-hit by the spill, dolphins are dying at a higher rate than normal and showing signs of oil poisoning, *NPR* reports. Scientists have also confirmed that the spill accelerated land loss in the area.

"Dolphin deaths continue, oil is still on the bottom of the ocean, tar balls keep coming up," GRN executive director Cynthia Sarthou told *NPR* on Monday. "And nobody really is able to say what we may find in five years, 10 years. It's really distressing to me."

A report released last month by the National Wildlife Federation estimated that at least 20 species are still being harmed by the spill and that the full extent of the damage may not be seen for years or even decades.

Since the spill, BP has spent \$27 billion in economic claims, fines, and restoration programs. It may also face a \$13.7 billion fine under the federal Clean Water Act. But Gulf Coast residents say those penalties do not approach the damage the oil giant caused.

**"We're sleepwalking our way into future disasters and learning nothing from the past."**

—**Miyoko Sakashita, Center for Biological Diversity** "They have no earthly idea

of what they destroyed," Byron Encalade, president of the Louisiana Oysterman Association and native of Pointe a la Hache, a community in the southern part of the state, told the *Guardian*. "You could give my men \$1m, but you took away a million-dollar lifestyle."

BP has also tried to downplay the extent of the damage with its own report, released last month, which concluded that scientific data "do not indicate a significant long-term impact to the population of any Gulf species" and that the Gulf will recover easily due to its "natural resilience."

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) dismissed the report immediately, stating, "BP misinterprets and misapplies data while ignoring published literature that doesn't support its claims."

Despite these studies, the fossil fuel industry is pushing to drill even further into the Gulf of Mexico at depths that were previously thought to be unreachable, without the proper safeguards for an operation that dangerous, as *CBC* points out:

Drillers are exploring a "golden zone" of oil and natural gas that lies roughly 6,095 metres (20,000 feet) beneath the sea floor, far deeper than BP's Macondo well, which was considered so tricky at the time that a rig worker killed in the blowout once described it to his wife as "the well from hell."

... A blowout in deeper water, farther from shore and containing even larger amounts of oil, would pose major challenges.

"We're setting the stage for the next Macondo blowout, and even worse," said Richard Charter, a senior fellow with the Ocean Foundation and a longtime industry watchdog.

Those projects come with the blessing of federal regulators. Last month, officials leased nearly 1 million acres for offshore drilling in the Gulf, despite the six-year low in oil prices worldwide. And in January, the Obama administration moved to expand drilling in the Atlantic, opening up a vast stretch of the seaboard to oil and gas extraction from Virginia to Georgia—and breaking a vital campaign promise in the process.

The Center for Biological Diversity explains the risks of that move:

The plan makes available 80 percent of all recoverable offshore oil at a time when deep and rapid cuts in fossil fuel use are needed to halt global warming. Producing and burning “recoverable” oil and gas reserves in the Arctic Ocean has the potential to release 15.8 billion tons of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere — the equivalent of the emissions from all forms of transportation in the United States over a nine-

year period or of burning 90 years' worth of oil flowing through the Keystone XL pipeline at maximum capacity.

"Today's anniversary is a stark reminder that when we drill, we spill," said Jacqueline Savitz, vice president of Oceana U.S., in a statement Monday. "Yet Congress has not passed a single piece of legislation to better regulate this dirty and dangerous industry.... Instead, we have seen a constant push to expand our drilling efforts."

"Drilling in the Atlantic could destroy coastal communities, economies, fish and marine mammals for decades to come," Savitz continued. "It would lead to a coastline scattered with oil and gas rigs, and industrialization in coastal communities. Commercial fishing, tourism and recreation would suffer from routine leaks as well as the looming risk of a Deepwater Horizon-like oil disaster along the East Coast."

"The Deepwater Horizon disaster should have been a wake-up call for the Obama administration to develop an energy policy that's less hazardous and more sustainable," added Miyoko Sakashita, oceans program director at the Center for Biological Diversity. "Instead we're sleepwalking our way into future disasters and learning nothing from the past."

Source: <http://www.commondreams.org/news/2015/04/20/five-years-after-deepwater-horizon-big-oil-still-exploiting-gulf-coast>