U. S. Environmental Protection Agency
Blog Round-up
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ROUND-UP OF MAJOR BLOGS

BP SPILL

Obama spill panel big on policy, not engineering (*Huffington Post*)

WASHINGTON — The panel appointed by President Barack Obama to investigate the Gulf of Mexico oil spill is short on technical expertise but long on talking publicly about "America's addiction to oil." One member has blogged about it regularly.

Only one of the seven commissioners, the dean of Harvard's engineering and applied sciences school, has a prominent engineering background – but it's in optics and physics. Another is an environmental scientist with expertise in coastal areas and the after-effects of oil spills. Both are praised by other scientists.

The five other commissioners are experts in policy and management.

The White House said the commission will focus on the government's "too cozy" relationship with the oil industry. A presidential spokesman said panel members will "consult the best minds and subject matter experts" as they do their work.

The commission has yet to meet, yet some panel members had made their views known.

Environmental activist Frances Beinecke on May 27 blogged: "We can blame BP for the disaster and we should. We can blame lack of adequate government oversight for the disaster and we should. But in the end, we also must place the blame where it originated: America's addiction to oil." And on June 3, May 27, May 22, May 18, May 4, she called for bans on drilling offshore and the Arctic.

"Even as questions persist, there is one thing I know for certain: the Gulf oil spill isn't just an accident. It's the result of a failed energy policy," Beinecke wrote on May 20.

Two other commissioners also have gone public to urge bans on drilling.

Co-chairman Bob Graham, a Democrat who was Florida governor and later a senator, led efforts to prevent drilling off his state's coast. Commissioner Donald Boesch of the University of

Maryland wrote in a Washington Post blog that the federal government had planned to allow oil drilling off the Virginia coast and "that probably will and should be delayed."

Boesch, who has made scientific assessments of oil spills' effects on the ecosystem, said usually oil spills are small. But he added, "The impacts of the oil and gas extraction industry (both coastal and offshore) on Gulf Coast wetlands represent an environmental catastrophe of massive and underappreciated proportions."

An expert not on the commission, Granger Morgan, head of the engineering and public policy department at Carnegie Mellon University and an Obama campaign contributor, said the panel should have included more technical expertise and "folks who aren't sort of already staked out" on oil issues.

Jerry Taylor of the libertarian Cato Institute described the investigation as "an exercise in political theater where the findings are preordained by the people put on the commission."

When the White House announced the commission, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and others made compared it with the one that investigated the 1986 Challenger accident. This one, however, doesn't have as many technical experts.

The 13-member board that looked into the first shuttle accident had seven engineering and aviation experts and three other scientists. The 2003 board that looked into the Columbia shuttle disaster also had more than half of the panel with expertise in engineering and aviation.

Iraj Ersahaghi, who heads the petroleum engineering program the University of Southern California, reviewed the names of oil spill commissioners and asked, "What do they know about petroleum?"

Ersahaghi said the panel needed to include someone like Bob Bea, a prominent petroleum engineering professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who's an expert in offshore drilling and the management causes of manmade disasters.

Bea, who's conducting his own investigation into the spill, told The Associated Press that his 66-member expert group will serve as a consultant to the commission, at the request of the panel's co-chairman, William K. Reilly, Environmental Protection Agency chief under President George H.W. Bush.

Adm. Hal Gehman, who oversaw the Columbia accident panel, said his advice to future commissions is to include subject matter experts. His own expertise was management and policy but said his engineering-oriented colleagues were critical to sorting through official testimony.

"Don't believe the first story; it's always more complicated than they (the people testifying) would like you to believe," Gehman said. "Complex accidents have complex causes."

The oil spill commission will not be at a loss for technical help, White House spokesman Ben LaBolt said.

For one, he said the panel will draw on a technical analysis that the National Association of Engineering is performing. Also, members will "consult the best minds and subject matter experts in the Gulf, in the private sector, in think tanks and in the federal government as they conduct their research."

That makes sense, said John Marburger, who was science adviser to President George W. Bush.

"It's not really a technical commission," Marburger said. "It's a commission that's more oriented to understanding the regulatory and organizational framework, which clearly has a major bearing on the incident."

Online:

Executive order creating the commission: http://tinyurl.com/spillpanel

White House announcement on commissioners: http://tinyurl.com/25g39t4

Frances Beinecke's blog archive: http://tinyurl.com/3p86vx

ENERGY

Is a 'utility-only' cap-and-trade bill worth passing? (*Grist*)

by David Roberts
21 Jun 2010 1:39 AM

American Power Act, cap-and-trade, electric utilities, electricity, Rahm Emanuel, US Senate
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Energy deliberations in the Senate are in the home stretch. There's a crucial White House meeting on Wednesday between Obama and key senators where some final decisions are likely to be made. There are, believe it or not, a few liberal senators fighting to keep carbon limits in the bill, but the bulk of "centrist" opinion at this point seems to be for throwing the climate provisions overboard and going with the more politically expedient "energy-only" option.

It's worth mentioning, in this context, there's a policy option between energy-only and a full-fledged carbon cap-and-trade system (or even the compromised system in the Kerry-Lieberman American Power Act). Namely: a cap-and-trade system that covers only the utility sector.

This utility-only idea has been floating around for a while and keeps popping up as a fallback position. Resident Senate Flake Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) recently said, "That is what I will be

pushing next year, a utility-only bill." Jason Grumet of the Bipartisan Policy Center says, "There's also a real possibility of setting a carbon emissions cap on the electric power sector if the White House and Senate leadership line up behind a more limited and targeted climate program." Joe Lieberman says he's open to it. Rahm Emanuel himself dropped this bomb on Friday, referring to this week's meeting:

"The idea of a 'utilities only' [approach] will also be welcomed," he said, emphasizing that "a wide range of ideas will be discussed."
Clearly people close to the process are exploring this option. What should we make of it?

The merits

Let's be clear: On policy grounds, a comprehensive, economy-wide cap on carbon is preferable to one that one covers only one sector. That is true almost by definition: The power of the economy-wide system is that it maximizes flexibility and encourages investment money to flow wherever the cheapest reductions can be found. If you create a silo'd cap-and-trade system, walling off one industry, you sharply curtail this flexibility. The result will be higher program costs and lower macroeconomic efficiency. (David Leonhardt smartly pointed out that conservatives and "centrists" are pushing policy in consistently more expensive and less efficient directions.)

At this point, however, the question may no longer be whether a comprehensive bill is preferable to a utility-only bill, but whether a utility-only bill is preferable to the energy-only bill the Senate seems bent on passing. Judged against that somewhat pathetic baseline, it is, in fact, preferable.

Focusing on electricity

If you're going to single out one sector for cap-and-trade, electricity is the right choice. For one thing, it's the biggest emitter:

U.S. Energy Information Administration
For another, most of the lowest cost carbon reductions are expected to come from electricity. Here's how the EIA projects an economy-wide cap-and-trade system would affect various sectors:

via Ezra Klein via Harvard\'s Robert Stavins
As you can see, about half the total carbon reduction under an economy-wide cap-and-trade system is expected to come from the utility sector. By contrast, transportation is scarcely affected. The reason for this is simple: it takes an extremely high price on carbon to substantially raise the price of gasoline.

Under the American Power Act, the ceiling on the price of a ton of carbon in 2013 is $25. Even in the unlikely event that the price hits the ceiling, that will boost the price of a gas by just under a quarter per gallon. Given that gas has swung around over a $2-3 range just in the last few

years, a quarter isn't much more than noise. A recent study at Harvard found that in order to reduce carbon emissions in the transportation sector 14 percent from 2005 levels by 2020, gas will need to rise to $7 a gallon by then. Getting there from today's $4 gas would require a carbon price of well over $300 a ton, and that, in turn, would completely upend the utility sector. So it won't happen.

In sum: cap-and-trade was always mostly about the utility sector, so if it becomes explicitly about the utility sector, it's not a total loss, if a few conditions are met.

Utility-only cap-and-trade could work if accompanied by strong energy provisions

The effects of a utility-only cap-and-trade system obviously depend on where the cap is set and how offsets are treated. Assuming the target would be the same as in previous bills (between 14 and 17 percent reduction from 2005 levels by 2020) and offsets are treated the same (two billion tons available), its main effect would be to induce the purchase of lots of offsets. There will also lots of fuel-switching to natural gas and some boost in renewable power.

That leaves a great deal of need work unaddressed. To amount to a credible bill, a utility-only cap-and-trade system would need to be accompanied by three things:

Measures to reduce oil use, along the lines of those Sen. Jeff Merkley proposed last week.
Measures to increase energy efficiency, along the lines of those, um, Sen. Jeff Merkley proposed last week.
Measures to accelerate research, development, and deployment of renewable energy, in particular: a) a renewable energy standard much stronger than those now on the table, and b) substantial investment in energy R&D.
And one more thing: if cap-and-trade is to begin with utilities, it cannot be permanently thus restricted. There must be something in the bill that allows for the expansion of the program to other sectors. (We can always hope for a future Congress that's less cowardly.)

If those conditions are met, a bill with a utility-only carbon price could be a credible step forward. Being realistic, one has to assume that they will be met partially if at all.

The politics

Darren Samuelsohn looked into the politics of utility-only carbon policy earlier this year and concluded, "the focus on just one industry also comes with perils, and it is far from certain that Senate politics would be any different." For one thing, electric utilities aren't particularly excited about being the guinea pigs for cap-and-trade.

Then again, utilities have been involved in a cap-and-trade program for 15 years (for acid rain pollutants) and they've always been amendable to carbon cap-and-trade as long as coal is protected and the EPA is blocked from regulating CO2 (both of which, unfortunately, have been accomplished in previous negotiations). There's reason to think they could be brought on board for this. And there's reason to think exempting manufacturers might harvest a few midwestern votes.

Perhaps cap-and-trade for utilities is where the downward slide of this bill will finally stop. Or maybe it's just another way station on the road to total capitulation, the preferred

WATER

Does EPA Mean Business As Usual? Is It Really Safe to Go Back in the Water? (*Huffington Post*)

Last week, when BP CEO Tony Hayward testified before Congress, many expected to hear him apologize for the disaster his company has caused. First and foremost, the loss of lives. Instead, GOP Congressman Joe Barton was the one saying he was sorry -- to BP.

In his opening statement, Barton, the top Republican on the committee overseeing the oil spill and its aftermath, delivered a personal apology to the oil giant. He said the $20 billion fund that President Obama directed BP to establish to provide relief to the victims of the oil disaster was a "tragedy in the first proportion."

At the stake of this tragedy lies the solution. Clean energy. Not political gerrymandering.

It's not about a Republican or Democrat trying to get re-elected. It's about making the people of the gulf "whole again."

But still, there are many questions left unanswered. And for the record, Mr. Hayward did an inappropriate job with exacting legal counsel to avoid the answers.

The questions Laurie David posed in her article, "What I Don't Understand," attempts to get down to the core.

"Why are we giving oil companies a free pass to drill a mile below the ocean's surface, where the pressure is so intense it causes oil to shoot out like a rocket, when we don't know how to fix major leaks? This spill stains the entire industry so why aren't other oil companies like Exxon Mobil using their record profits to help stop this catastrophe? Or to develop cutting-edge ways to clean up oil spills when they inevitably happen? And why are Valero and other Texas oil giants paying millions to try to dismantle California's clean energy policies rather than putting money towards long-term clean energy solutions?"

BP cannot ignore 60 thousand barrels of oil a day. There is no apology. No executive on record will ever be able to undo or replace lives and livelihoods that have been taken. This is the worst environmental disaster of the 21st century.

Laurie David was responsible for bringing the subject of global warming to villages all across the world. Her work, along with Al Gore's An Inconvenient Truth, helped us realize that "we can't afford to let global warming continue unabated. In 2005, Katrina proved that "climate change is happening, and the impacts are only going to get worse."

"What will happen when two catastrophes in one region meet, with this year's predicted horrible hurricane season soon hitting oily waters?"

This is the wake-up call. We must move towards clean renewable energy that is safer for human and animal survival. However, the problems which could be abated using natural solutions like hair booms, have been replaced with chemical dispersants -- namely, Corexit.

LuxEco Living editorial assistant, Alanna Brown reported that, "We first learned about Corexit in 1989, when Nalco engineered it for cleanup of the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound. In this video, while workers claim the use of Corexit to be a success, one can't help but notice the biohazard suits and masks they wear to avoid contact with it. So basically, what we have now, in 2010, being dumped into our Gulf by the tens of thousands of gallons is a chemical not to be touched or inhaled. According to the Alaska Community Action on Toxics, the use of Corexit during the Exxon Valdez oil spill caused "respiratory, nervous system, liver, kidney and blood disorders" in people.

It gets worse, here is an EPA analysis of what over 800,000 gallons of Corexit consists of:
X. ANALYSIS FOR HEAVY METALS, CYANIDE, AND CHLORINATED HYDROCARBONS

Compound/Concentration (ppm)

Arsenic < 0.005

Cadmium < 0.01

Chromium < 1.0

Copper < 0.2

Lead < 0.1

Mercury < 0.003

Nicke < 0.1

Zinc 0.1

Cyanide < 0.01

Chlorinated < 0.01

"This means that the one-thousandth percent concentration of arsenic, the one-tenth percent concentration of lead, the one-hundredth percent concentration of cyanide, and all the other deadly compounds listed, have been dumped into our sea 800,000 times over.

Not a pretty picture. Worse than the tar coated marine mammals, birds and fish we have been seeing on AP and UPI.

WARNING! The Safety Data Sheet for Corexit 9500 states, "Do not get in eyes, on skin, on clothing. Do not take internally. Avoid breathing vapor. Use with adequate ventilation. In case of contact with eyes, rinse immediately with plenty of water and seek medical advice. After contact with skin, wash immediately with plenty of soap and water." It goes on to give detailed first aid measures if any of these warnings are not properly observed. However, the most haunting of all is one simple statement under the Environmental Precautions heading. It reads plainly, "Do not contaminate surface water."

Dr. William Sawyer presented a worst-case analysis of the risks associated with Corexit. He claims that Corexit is known as deodorized kerosene, "a substance with health risks to humans as well as sea turtles, dolphins, breathing reptiles, birds, and any species that need to surface for air exchanges." The article also discusses why these dispersants bare the name. It is because, simply, the chemicals cause the oil to form globules and then those globules disperse via wind and wave action. "So instead of having the oil collect at the surface, dispersed droplets of oil can spread more quickly and in more directions. This means the droplets linger longer in the water, collecting on the seabed and harming the ecosystem offshore."

The next issue of concern is the affect Corexit has had so far on human life. A CBS news clip informs us that cleanup workers with exposure to dispersants on the Deepwater Horizon spill have already fallen ill. On May 7, 7 workers were rushed to the Jefferson Parish emergency room and as of June 7, there were already 75 people complaining of flu-like respiratory symptoms. They attribute this to the fact that many workers wore little to no protective gear when the cleanup first began. Workers who have since worn the proper gear have not reported illness. However, the number of injured is predicted to increase."

Alanna Brown points out that Corexit has a shelf-life. "How will the injured receive accurate medical care when 10-30% of the compounds that structure the chemical are unknown? By reviewing the previously mentioned manufacturer's safety data sheet, we find the main components to be 2-butoxyethanol, organic sulfonic acid, and a small amount of propylene glycol. However Nalco will not release that crucial 10-30% of its proprietary makeup due to unwanted industry competition. Despite this, Wired Science briefs us on just one such competitor: Dispersit. This dispersant was approved 10 years ago by the EPA, and is being touted as "twice as good at breaking down South Louisiana crude oil in lab comparisons...[and] half as toxic."

What makes this issue hair raising is what Alanna (and others conclude.)

"Most would agree, the powers-that-be don't have the best interest of us or our eco-system at heart. But they can't turn off our voices; those of us who care have the ability to speak out on behalf of the environment. Here are ways you can help."

Don't let any big oil giant fool you ... there are other methods of cleaning up this oil spill gusher that doesn't further degrade the environment with toxic chemicals. In my next post, I will highlight some of the most visionary people who are inspiring a grassroots network and deploying non-toxic, renewable and environmentally-sustainable methods for oil clean-up.

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