U. S. Environmental Protection Agency
Blog Round-up
Prepared by the Office of Public Affairs

Friday, February 15, 2013

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ROUND-UP OF MAJOR BLOGS

AIR

EPA Ramps Up Gulf Air Quality Monitoring (*Huffington Post*)

First Posted: 05- 3-10 12:07 PM | Updated: 05- 3-10 12:18 PM

NEW ORLEANS -- The Environmental Protection Agency says it's stepping up air quality monitoring on the Gulf Coast.

There are concerns that vapors from the oil and controlled fires might cause health problems for people living in the region. An oil smell could cause headaches or nausea, but EPA spokesman Dave Bary said Saturday there have been no confirmed reports of such problems.

State health agencies are advising people having such symptoms to stay indoors and ventilate their homes with air conditioning.

Crude oil gives off gaseous vapors. But Jonathan Ward, an environmental toxicology professor at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, says the vapors likely will be mostly dispersed by brisk sea breezes by the time they reach shore.

WATER

Oil Spill: Focus on Containment, Clean Up, Causation (*Heritage.org*)

Posted By Nicolas Loris On May 3, 2010 @ 6:34 pm In Energy and Environment

The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is an unfortunate and terrible accident that poses economic and environmental challenges to the Gulf coast. The fact that the explosion took eleven lives is regrettable and condolences to friends and families who lost their loved ones. Many questions are yet without answers; the most general and pressing being: what went wrong? Along with stopping the leak and containing the oil slick to minimize, the imperative concern is to figure out what went wrong. There will be lots of finger pointing and calls for action but Members of Congress and the White House should refrain from making any rash political decisions.

Despite accusations that BP cut corners on preventative measures, BP America Inc. President Lamar McKay maintains that's not the case saying [1], "My belief is that that does not have anything to do with it. I believe we've got a failed piece of equipment. We don't know why it failed yet in this contracted rig." Whether that's the case remains to be seen and will require a thorough investigation. The company is spending $6 million a day to reduce the environmental impact with burnoffs, oil booms, chemical-filled barriers and other dispersant chemicals and is attempting to activate the blowout prevention mechanism that was supposed to go into effect when the rig exploded. Answering this question must be at the top of the priority list.

After the "what happened and why" questions follow the "who's to blame" ones. The obvious responsible party is BP and the company has vowed to pay for the clean up costs for [2]"legitimate and objectively verifiable claims for other loss and damage caused by the spill." This should include reimbursing the taxpayers for government resources allocated towards the problem [3], which thus far includes the Coast Guard, the Navy, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Minerals Management Services.

Also on the receiving end of much blame is President Obama and his administration. Critics on the left and the right disparaged the president's slow response. Some are calling the Gulf oil spill "President Obama's Katrina" since federal efforts weren't ramped up immediately. A large part of this may have been the Coast Guard underestimating the severity [4]of the problem, but regardless, there will be plenty of time for passing blame. The focus needs to be remain on containment, clean up and causation.

For the most part the administration's reaction has been prudent. President Obama has called on [5]Department of Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to report on new technologies might be needed to prevent future spills in the next thirty days. In this time no new lease sales will occur. Although none were meant to occur anyhow, this is a common sense approach for the near-term.

But the White House should refrain from making any impulsive decisions that affect our long-term energy policy. While there are economic consequences with the spill, there are much bigger economic costs with a ban on offshore drilling. Even Secretary Salazar acknowledged this – noting that 30 percent of our nation's oil production comes from the Gulf. He asserted [6], "For us to turn off those spigots would have a very, very huge impact on America's economy right now. This is an industry that can operate safely. There has been a tragic accident here and we need to learn the lessons from it, and we will not move forward with any kind of activity on offshore oil and gas drilling that isn't going to have safety first." Secretary Salazar should also be commended for this level-headed approach.

The knee jerk reaction for politicians is to put in place laws and regulations they believe will solve the problem, but often times these can have adverse effects, as explained by Richard Fulmer [7]:

Suppose, for example, that the final result of a congressional inquiry into a tragedy is a bill mandating the use of technology "X." Let us further suppose that X is, indeed, an excellent, state-of-the-art solution, and not something that was selected because Technology X Industries, Inc. made a generous campaign contribution to Senator Jones, or because the X Solutions company happens to be located in Congressman Smith's district.

In a dynamic, free market economy, technology X is likely to be superseded very quickly by superior technology "Y." Once X has been mandated, however, Y may never be used. First, innovators have little incentive to investigate alternatives to X, given that entrenched laws must be overturned before such alternatives can be used. Second, even if Y were to be developed, the status quo surrounding X would fight to keep the laws mandating X firmly in place."

The Gulf oil spill presents significant near-term and long-term questions and challenges. We need to address the environmental clean up and cause of the spill before moving forward with anything else.

NOAA Warned Interior It Was Underestimating Threat Of Serious Spill (*Huffington Post*)

First Posted: 05- 3-10 04:48 PM | Updated: 05- 3-10 08:13 PM

National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration officials last fall warned the Department of Interior, which regulates offshore oil drilling, that it was dramatically underestimating the frequency of offshore oil spills and was dangerously understating the risk and impacts a major spill would have on coastal residents.

NOAA is the nation's lead ocean resource agency, and the warnings came in its response to a draft of the Obama Administration's offshore oil drilling plans. The comments were Web-published in October by the whistle-blowing group, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER).

But NOAA's views were largely brushed aside as Obama went ahead and announced on March 31 that he would open vast swaths of American coastal waters to offshore drilling -- a plan now very much in doubt as a blown-out BP well in the Gulf of Mexico spews out an estimated 200,000 gallons of oil daily, for the 13th straight day.

The memo, which NOAA Administrator Jane Lubchenco wrote was based on the agency's "extensive science, management and stewardship expertise related to oceans, coasts and marine ecosystem" recommended that Interior conduct "a more complete analysis of the potential human dimensions of offshore production."

NOAA complained that the draft report overstated the safety of offshore oil production by using information on frequency of spills from 1973 to 2004. NOAA pointed out there was a "substantial increase in spill volume in 2005, primarily due to spills associated with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Some of the damaged rigs and pipelines damaged during the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons continue to have episodic releases, and repairs have not been fully completed."

Citing Interior's own data, NOAA scolded it for asserting that it had "been many years since any substantial environmental impacts have been observed as a result of an oil spill caused by the [Outer Continental Shelf] production and transportation activities."

NOAA also wrote that the administration's "analysis of the risk and impacts of accidental spills and chronic impacts are understated and generally not supported or referenced, using vague terms and phrases such as 'no substantive degradation is expected' and 'some marine mammals could be harmed.'"

NOAA didn't even take comfort in the fact that new technology and laws had reduced the frequency of major spills in the U.S. overall since 1990. Analysts including the Congressional Research Service "have questioned the trend in spills, suggesting that '[r]ecent annual data indicate that the overall decline of annual spill events may have stopped' and that '[t]he threat of oil spills raises the question of whether U.S. officials have the necessary resources at hand to respond to a major spill. There is some concern that the favorable U.S. spill record has resulted

in a loss of experienced personnel, capable of responding quickly and effectively to a major oil spill.'"

UPDATE AT 8:10 p.m. ET: NOAA officials Monday evening stressed the parts of their memo that *were* heeded by Interior. "NOAA's critical concerns were addressed in the comprehensive national offshore energy plan -- new drilling leases in the Arctic and the Aleutian Bay were halted," spokesman Scott Smullen told HuffPost. "In addition, the plan included more detailed assessments of the environmental impact on marine habitats and endangered species, as well climate change and ocean acidification."

Jeff Ruch, the head of the public-employee whistleblowing group, said that as in many other regulatory agencies, Obama political appointees in the Interior Department's notoriously troubled Minerals Management Service (MMS) have not taken enough steps to reverse the anti-environmental and anti-science policies of the Bush years.

"For the most part, the Obama team is still the Bush team," Ruch told HuffPost, noting that beyond a thin layer of political appointees, offices like MMS are run by managers who were "promoted during the Bush years -- In many instances, promoted for basically violating the law. And from what we can tell, their conduct hasn't changed."

Futhermore, Ruch said, Obama "sees environmental issues as a political bargaining chip."

Indeed, Obama's decision to increase offshore drilling was widely seen as a way of getting some Republican support for the administration's climate change bill.