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

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ROUND-UP MAJOR BLOGS

BP SPILL

Feds Dramatically Increase Oil Spill Estimate, Making BP's The Worst Oil Accident In History (*Huffington Post*)

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BP's disastrous oil well explosion sent over 4 million barrels of oil spewing into the Gulf of Mexico, the Coast Guard announced Monday, dramatically increasing the most recent federal estimate.

That's more than 170 million gallons, and makes it the worst accidental oil spill in history -- outpacing the 1979 Ixtoc spill, also in the Gulf of Mexico, which lasted for a year.

A federal scientific task force, finally allowed access to the wellhead just prior to it being capped on July 15, took elaborate pressure readings and other measurements to reach its conclusions.

Federal officials now estimate that 53,000 barrels of oil per day were gushing from the well immediately preceding its closure, and that even more was coming out earlier. The well exploded on April 20, killing 11 workers.

Scientists now estimate that a total of 4.9 million barrels were released from the well, with about 800,000 barrels of that successfully recaptured by BP once the first containment cap was installed.

The Obama administration and BP originally estimated the spill at 5,000 barrels a day, and clung to that figure for weeks despite protestations by scientists and environmental groups, and even after a video clip of the spewing pipe exposed that as a wild underestimate.

It wasn't until late May that the Interior Department described 12,000 to 19,000 barrels as a "preliminary best estimate" of the flow. That number then increased again two weeks later, to 20,000 to 40,000 barrels a day, and then a few days after that to 35,000 to 65,000 barrels a day.

Up until Monday, "over 2 million barrels" had emerged as a consensus estimate.

The new estimates are from the National Incident Command's Flow Rate Technical Group, led by United States Geological Survey Director Marcia McNutt, and a team of Department of Energy scientists and engineers.

The groups relied heavily on newly available pressure readings from the new containment cap, the Unified Command wrote in a press release. The finding were also "based on a combination of analyses of high resolution videos taken by ROVs, measurements and modeling of reservoir and well properties, acoustic technologies, and measurements of oil collected by the oil production ship together with pressure measurements inside the containment cap."

The worst oil spill of all time was intentional: Between 5 and 10 million barrels of oil are thought to have been spilled into the Persian Gulf in 1991 by Iraqi troops who opened the valves on oil rigs and pipelines.

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On Gulf, crews hope kill attempt will do the trick (*Huffington Post*)

NEW ORLEANS — Crews hoped to begin pumping mud and perhaps cement down the throat of the blown-out oil well at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico on Tuesday in what BP officials said could be the method of attack that finally snuffs the spill.

Engineers planned to probe the busted blowout preventer with an oil-like liquid to determine whether it could handle the static kill. If the test is successful, they plan to spend Tuesday through Thursday pumping the heavy mud down the well.

The so-called "static kill" is meant as insurance for the crews who have spent months fighting the oil spill. The only thing keeping oil from blowing into the Gulf at the moment is an experimental cap that has held for more than two weeks but was never meant to be permanent.

BP officials had insisted for months that a pair of costly relief wells were the only surefire way to kill the oil leak but said Monday that the static kill alone – involving lines running from a ship to the blown-out well a mile below – might do the trick.

BP Senior Vice President Kent Wells said that if the static kill is successful, the relief wells may not be needed to do the same thing weeks later, but from the bottom. The primary relief well, near completion, will still be finished and could be used simply to ensure the leak is plugged, he said.

"Even if we were to pump the cement from the top, we will still continue on with the relief well and confirm that the well is dead," he said. Either way, "we want to end up with cement in the bottom of the hole."

Government officials and company executives have long said the wells, which can cost about $100 million each, might be the only way to make certain the oil is contained to its vast undersea reservoir. A federal task force said about 172 million gallons of oil made it into the Gulf between April and mid-July, when a temporary cap bottled up all the oil.

The task force said actually about 206 million gallons total gushed out of the mile-deep well but a fleet of boats and other efforts were able to contain more than 33 million gallons.

The 172 million gallons is on the high end of recent estimates that anywhere from 92 million to 184 million gallons had gushed into the sea.

The company began drilling the primary, 18,000-foot relief well May 2, 12 days after the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded and killed 11 workers, and a second backup well May 16. The first well is now only about 100 feet from the target, and Wells said it could reach it as early as Aug. 11.

Retired Adm. Thad Allen, the government's point man on the spill response, said Monday that the focus now is on making sure the static kill is successful. But he cautioned that federal officials don't see it as "the end all, be all until we get the relief well done."

Before the effort can begin, engineers must probe the broken blowout preventer with an oil-like liquid to decide whether it can handle the static kill process. They had hoped to begin the hours-long test Monday but delayed it until Tuesday after a small leak was discovered in the hydraulic control system.

One of the biggest variables on the static kill's finality is whether the area called the annulus, which is between the inner piping and the outer casing, has sprung an oil leak. Engineers probably won't be able to answer that question until they drill in from the bottom, he said.

"Everyone would like to have this thing over as soon as possible," Allen said, adding: "We don't know the condition of the well until we start pushing mud into it."

The company's statements Monday might signal that it is more concerned than it has acknowledged about debris found in the relief well after it was briefly capped as Tropical Storm Bonnie passed last week, said Ed Overton, a Louisiana State University environmental sciences professor.

Plus, trying to seal the well from the top gives BP two shots at ending the disaster, Overton said.

"Frankly, if they can shut it off from the top and it's a good, permanent seal, I'll take it," Overton said. "A bird in the hand at this point is a good thing with this deal."

BP and federal officials have managed to contain large parts of the spill through skimmers, oil-absorbant boom and chemical dispersants meant to break up the oil.

Federal regulators have come under fire from critics who say that BP was allowed to use

excessive amounts of the dispersants, but government officials counter that they have helped dramatically cut the use of the chemicals since late May.

The Environmental Protection Agency released a study Monday concluding that when mixed with oil, chemical dispersants used to break up the crude in the Gulf are no more toxic to aquatic life than oil alone.

Associated Press writers Jeffrey Collins and Harry R. Weber in New Orleans and Matthew Daly in Washington contributed to this report.

BP Gulf Disaster Act Two: The Corexit Calamity (*Huffington Post)*

Now that BP's spurting oil well in the Gulf of Mexico officially known as MC252 has apparently been shut in, and the relief well that will eventually reduce the pressure in the area, is almost done, it would be nice to think that the worst is over and all that remains now is the long, slow process of cleaning up the mess.
Unfortunately, due to some very poor judgment by the folks in charge, this is only the beginning of a nightmare that will continue to reveal its true magnitude over the weeks, months, and years to come.

Back in mid-May, I posted this story after speaking to a couple of experts about the consequences of the spill. Both issued strong warning against the use of dispersants. Terry Hazen, a PhD micro-biologist at Lawrence Berkley Lab who has studied oil spills extensively, cited the example of the massive Amoco-Cadiz spill off the coast of France. Five years after the spill, the coastline had returned to normal in areas that had been left untreated. But 32 years later, the areas that had been treated with dispersants, at great expense, have yet to recover.

Marine toxicologist, Riki Ott, author of Not One Drop: Betrayal and Courage in the Wake of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill, says that these harmful chemicals that can linger in the water for decades, are not adequately tested by the EPA. And although Corexit, the chemical in question, is known to be a fetal toxin that damages blood cells and kidneys cells, causing black urine among workers that come in contact with it, the EPA, lifted an existing ban, not based on any new data, but only after changes in personnel and policies.

Despite these urgent warnings, BP continued to administer Corexit, an oil-based, industrial strength solvent, often under the cover of darkness, to the point that some two million gallons have now been intentionally introduced into the teeming gulf waters, despite the fact that, as Ott has said, it is likely more toxic than the oil it was intended to control. Why so much dispersant? Because, says Ott, "it hides the oil. Oil fines are based on how much oil was spilled." Just follow the money.

According to Chris Pincetich, a marine biologist and member of the Sea Turtle Restoration Project, the panel in charge of the cleanup used a cost-benefit analysis to determine whether or not Corexit should be used. That analysis assumed that Corexit was not toxic, based on the EPA

test which only requires that embryonic fish survive in it for 96 hours. But Pincetich said that although the fish survived for three days, 90% were dead within two weeks.

Pincetich is concerned about the aerial spraying because of the tendency of the chemical to drift and evaporate in the warm southern air. Since no one knows what the real impact of these chemicals is, everyone in the region is part of a big experiment.

Riki Ott says that if her family lived along the Gulf Coast, based on what she has seen these past three months, she would evacuate them immediately. Her main priority right now, having seen cleanup workers with headaches, dizziness, sore throats, burning eyes, rashes and blisters that are so deep, they're leaving scars- is to get respirators for all of them.

She fears that numerous regions along the coast will become cancer clusters in twenty years. Water samples taken randomly along Alabama beaches had petroleum concentrations between 13 and 42 times the normal level. One sample, taken on Dauphin Island, exploded during the test.

EPA whistleblower Hugh Kaufman says that the agency has been downplaying the threat to avoid creating a panic. That aligns well with what Riki Ott said the EPA chief Lisa Jackson told her, "I am walking a fine line between truth and hysteria. We don't want to create a panic." So, it appears that EPA is aiding and abetting BP in their attempt to cover-up the full extent of the damage.

The May article also discussed a Michigan Company Recovery I, that had developed a corncob-based absorbent, that is a very safe and effective alternative to dispersants. The company was recently certified as a vendor for the cleanup in Florida, which should provide an opportunity to demonstrate this, much safer approach to the key players.

Previously posted on Triple Pundit.

RP Siegel, PE is co-author of the sustainability thriller Vapor Trails, about an oil spill and the man responsible.

Michigan Oil Spill: EPA Official Says Improvements Have Been Made At Spill Site (*Huffington Post*)

LANSING, Mich. — A regional administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency said Sunday that significant improvement had been made at the site of an oil spill in a southern Michigan river, but the agency cautioned that it will take months to complete the cleanup.

Those efforts, along with air and water quality monitoring, continue to increase along the affected stretch of the Kalamazoo River, EPA regional administrator Susan Hedman said during a media briefing in Marshall.

The oil flow was stopped and contained in a 25-mile stretch of the river from Marshall westward past Battle Creek. Several hundred workers are on crews along the river devoted to the cleanup.

"Containment is adequate now," said Mark Durno, the EPA's deputy incident commander. "Now it's a matter of recovery and removal of the remainder of the sheen and small patches of oil that remain on the Kalamazoo River."

The EPA estimates it will take weeks to get the oil out of the river and months to clean it off river banks and the flood plain. It could take several months to clean up the marshy area where the spill began near a creek that flows into the Kalamazoo River, the agency said.

Officials with Enbridge Inc., which owns the pipeline, estimated Sunday that the company had recovered slightly more than half the oil that had leaked.

Enbirdge officials said they detected the leak July 26. Investigators are reviewing 911 calls to Marshall area fire departments made the previous evening by residents complaining of a strong gas odor to try and determine if the leak might have begun earlier.

The EPA estimates the spill at more than 1 million gallons of crude, while the Canadian company estimates the total at 820,000 gallons. The leak came from a 30-inch pipeline, which was built in 1969 and carries about 8 million gallons of oil daily from Griffith, Ind., to Sarnia, Ontario.

The cost of the cleanup hasn't been determined. Enbridge is responsible for the cleanup bill, including money that the EPA and other government agencies will spend on its response.

"Our goal is to return the river to the state it was in before this incident," Enbridge CEO Patrick D. Daniel said.

The EPA and other government officials have scheduled a public meeting for residents at Marshall's high school on Monday evening. A similar public hearing will be scheduled for Battle Creek residents later in the week.

The section of the pipeline where the leak occurred could be removed early this week. It's expected to be taken to a National Transportation Safety Board lab for testing to try and determine the cause of the incident.

The EPA on Saturday said it had rejected the Calgary, Alberta-based company's long-range cleanup plan because of "deficiencies in content and technical details." It ordered Enbridge to submit a revised version by Monday. Daniel said the company will modify the plan to meet EPA requirements.

U.S. regulators earlier this year demanded improvements to the pipeline network that includes a segment that ruptured in southern Michigan. The Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, the U.S. Department of Transportation's regulatory arm, said it had summoned Enbridge Inc. executives in February to discuss problems with the 1,900-mile Lakehead system.

The agency has cited Enbridge or its affiliates for 30 enforcement actions since 2002.
More on Gulf Oil Spill

Local Perspective on the Kalamazoo River Oil Spill (*DAILY KOS*)

As someone who lives in Kalamazoo and was in Marshall (the site of the spill) this last week visiting relatives, I thought the community might appreciate a few local insights to this disaster.

Thanks a million to Patriot Daily news Clearinghouse for his/her previous diary on this topic.

As things are still developing I can offer you a mixture of information from print, web link and face to face rumors. I am relaying only those rumors that I find credible (considering both the source and the content).

The day of the spill the whole city of Marshall smelled like natural gas. It took Enbridge 12 hours to figure out that there was a leak and almost 4 hours after that to report the incident to the Feds (source: Kalamazoo Gazette print edition).

This spill of over 1 million gallons of oil in fresh water is unprecedented (see this excellent interview with Jeff Spoelstra, the coordinator of the Kalamazoo River Watershed Council). Several scientists on local radio and in the Kalamazoo Gazette have made the point that the effect of such a large spill in a fresh water environment is unknown.

From the Times:

Scientists fear that the worst may be yet to come for fish in the river. Jay Wesley, a biologist with the State of Michigan, said the oil spill had killed fish in "very limited numbers" along the affected stretch of the river, from Marshall westward into Battle Creek.

The bigger problems for fish may come within a week or so, if the spill results in decreased oxygen levels in the water. Mr. Wesley said insects, algae, frogs and turtles had been killed in high numbers, which could hurt the fish food supply.

"The effects are probably going to be more long-term," Mr. Wesley said. "We probably won't know the full effects for weeks or months or years."

From the same link, the days of fishing in the Kalamazoo River near Marshall are done for the foreseeable future - they have been shot already for those of farther downstream due to PCB contamination from now defunct paper mills:

"health officials considered fish taken from the waters from Marshall to Battle Creek all right to eat in limited amounts — unlike those from a downstream, westward stretch from Kalamazoo that is laden with PCBs and is on the federal Superfund list of highly contaminated areas.

First hand observation indicates that the Kalamazoo river is over its banks right now - the plants/ecosystems in the floodplains will take quite a hit I would imagine as the oil damages the vegetation and soil.

Kellogg had to temporarily shut down a cereal plant as a result of the spill for fear that the odor would seep into the food. I hope they sue Enbrdige's pants off for business losses.

A downstream dam has apparently contained the spill so that it is unlikely that oil will make it down stream into Lake Michigan or on to the shores of other communities (such as Kalamazoo or Sagatuck).

Tonight the EPA is holding a townhall meeting at Marshall High School. We'll see what the latest news is.

The last I read (Kalamazoo Gazette) farmers have been advised (not banned) to not use the Kalamazoo River to irrigate their crops pending lab results. I have not heard if those labs show contamination downstream - if so they are screwed. August is quite dry. Farming without water to irrigate will cause substantial hardship. Let's hope those tests do not detect contamination. Test results are due today. Cross your fingers/pray, whatever it is you do please do it.

One final note, the Kalamazoo River basin is recovering from PCB contamination mentioned earlier. The river is just starting to make a comeback although there is a ways to go. We really don't need this. This river is not only our town's namesake - it cuts right through the middle of our downtown.

And the topperin terms of sheer disgust:

Battle Creek girl vomits black liquid

BATTLE CREEK, Mich. (NEWSCHANNEL 3) - Dozens of people have gotten sick from exposure to the oil in the Kalamazoo River.

We spoke with one woman in Battle Creek who says doctors diagnosed her daughter with hydro-carbon ingestion.

Yuck. Poor child.
Finally the latest news on the oil spill from local channel 3:
Fight the good fight folks.
May the wind take your troubles away.

Limited Test Finds Dispersant Not Adding Toxicity To Oil, But Questions Remain (*Huffington Post*)

The combination of oil and dispersants is no more toxic to sea life than oil alone, the Environmental Protection Agency announced Monday after conducting a new, but very limited, round of tests.

The EPA was responding in part to concerns raised by some scientists that adding dispersant to oil has actually made the resulting mix more toxic than oil alone. BP applied almost 2 million gallons of dispersant to the oil its blown-out well spewed into the Gulf of Mexico.

But EPA's test, conducted on just two kinds of sea animals -- one species of shrimp, and one species of small fish -- only tested to see how much of a substance was necessary to kill them.

That means the experiment doesn't resolve concerns about long term effects -- or even medium-term effects. What happens when the shrimp or fish eat enough dispersed oil to make them sick, but not die? Or what about prolonged exposure? And what about the sea turtles?

Indeed, an agency spokesman e-mailed me: "This study focused on short-term, acute toxicological effects of oil and dispersant-oil mixtures. This study did not examine the mechanisms of toxicity. Oil ingestion was difficult to observe in the larval forms of both species used in this series of acute tests and signs of ingestion were not overtly apparent."

Similarly, the test doesn't resolve concerns that breaking up the oil into tiny droplets makes it more likely to enter the food chain -- a scenario that appears more likely now that scientists at Tulane University have found signs of an oil-and-dispersant mix under the shells of tiny blue crab larvae all over the Gulf of Mexico. A lot of larger sea animals eat crab larvae.

Here's what the EPA spokesman had to say about that: "The purpose of dispersant application is to disperse the oil into smaller droplets which facilitates biodegradation, remove floating oil from the surface, and thus reducing the volume of oil reaching important shoreline habitats like wetlands, marshes, beaches and estuaries. EPA has no evidence that dispersants are entering the food chain. The FDA, USDA and NOAA are continuing to investigate these issues."

The test called for oil and dispersant to be mixed energetically, but it didn't necessarily recreate the mixing that took place in this spill, where the dispersant was being pumped directly into into a geyser of intensely hot crude oil and gas shooting into frigid water under 7000 pound per square inch of pressure.

Susan Shaw, the director of the Marine Environmental Research Institute and the leader of a group of scientists concerned about the oil-dispersant mix, called Monday's announcement by the EPA "a defensive move to make them look in control." It was the Coast Guard, not the EPA, that called the shots when it came to dispersant application.

She said testing two species is not enough. "There are at least 15.000 marine species in the Gulf that could be impacted by the dispersed oil."

And she noted that the EPA completely failed to address the concern that dispersants can increase the uptake of oil by organisms, because the same properties that allow them to disperse

oil also make it easier for them to move through cell walls and other protective barriers.

The EPA test involved mixtures of Lousiana Sweet Crude oil and eight dispersants, including Corexit 9500A. BP applied 1.8 million gallons of Corexit as part of its spill response. The test did find that one dispersant, Nokomis 3-AA, when mixed with oil was more toxic than oil itself. That dispersant was not used on the Gulf spill.

"EPA recognizes that dispersant usage is an environmental tradeoff not to be taken lightly," said Paul Anastas, EPA's assistant administrator for research and development. But, he said: "The good thing about the current scenario is we are seeing the oil in a place where it can be biodegraded by the natural biodegrading process that takes place."

CLIMATE CHANGE / GLOBAL WARMING

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BETTER FEDS THAN DEAD

EPA takes center stage on climate action, gears up to battle Big Coal 6 (*Grist*)

by Randy Rieland
2 Aug 2010 11:49 AM
The less-than-glorious death of cap-and-trade means that any effort to control greenhouse gases at the federal level now rests solely with the EPA. Not surprisingly, the agency has become the favorite whipping boy of politicians stirring up job-loss paranoia.

What's two years? Sen. Jay Rockefeller, Democrat from Coal Central, aka West Virginia, is making noises about introducing an amendment to the Senate energy bill that would stop the EPA from dealing with greenhouse gases for two years. Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) attached a similar measure to small-business legislation. That bill is stalled now, but Murkowski's not likely to go mellow on us. She told Politico's Darren Samuelsohn, "You attack it at all fronts. You go the judicial route. You go the legislative route. I think this is important to make sure we are looking at all avenues."

Take that snit outta here: For its part, the EPA came out swinging last week, rejecting challenges from 10 petitioners -- including attorneys general from Virginia and Texas -- to the agency's position that greenhouse gases endanger public health and the environment. The challengers ranted about "Climategate" and how it raised serious questions about climate science. But as The Washington Post notes in an editorial today:

As with much climate-change skepticism, the petitions were based "on selectively edited, out-of-context data and a manufactured controversy," EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson said. Among other things, the agency reviewed every document from the "Climategate" email hack at a respected British climate research unit. The EPA found what four other independent studies did:

that the emails contained some "candid" language but nothing that seriously discredits the scientific consensus on global warming.

Or we can do it the hard way: The upshot is that, given the failure of the Senate to pass climate legislation, the effort to address the problem will fall into the byzantine world of regs and lawsuits. As Eric Pooley writes at Yale Environment 360:

Welcome to the "glorious mess" -- Michigan Rep. John Dingell's phrase for the tangle of regulation and litigation that will follow when Congress fails to act. We are about to experience precisely the sort of costly, protracted, plant-by-plant trench warfare the cap was intended to avoid. Since the utilities and the manufacturers weren't willing to cut a deal, this is what they get. The fragile period of compromise and cooperation between environmentalists and big business may now be coming to an end. Green groups that have invested time and money into the legislative process are now putting on their war paint and returning to the courts, with a renewed focus on stopping new coal-fired power plants and shutting down the oldest and dirtiest ones.

Steven Cohen, executive director of Columbia University's Earth Institute, goes so far as to suggest that utility companies will rue the day cap-and-trade withered away. He writes in The Huffington Post:

The price on carbon long sought by environmental activists and alternative energy entrepreneurs will be set indirectly by [EPA] regulations. Electric utilities will need to develop a method to sequester and store greenhouse gases. Unlike Waxman-Markey, there will be no offsets available for purchase to allow emissions to continue. There will be no cap-and-trade to allow old polluting factories to buy pollution allowances from newer, cleaner facilities. There will be compliance schedules, penalties, and injunctions. The same methods we employed to clean water, toxics, and other air pollutants will be trotted out to deal with the U.S. contribution to global warming. It will be the Environmental Lawyer Full Employment Act of 2010. To all you law students out there, sign up for climate law; it's going to be a growth area for the next several decades.

That's the way we coal: Ultimately, the EPA's efforts to control pollutants other than greenhouse gases might lead to the shutdown of up to 20 percent of coal-fired power plants in the U.S. by 2015, as Bradford Plumer writes for The New Republic:

[C]oal-fired power plants don't just emit heat-trapping gases that warm the planet. They also churn out mercury, which accumulates in fish and causes developmental problems in young children. They belch out sulfur dioxide, which creates acid rain. They send up nitrogen dioxide, which helps form ground-level ozone and leads to all sorts of respiratory and cardiovascular problems, sending tens of thousands to the hospital each year. They produce coal-ash waste that can poison surrounding areas, as happened in 2008, when a dike broke at a Tennessee Valley Authority plant, creating a sludge flood that will cost up to $825 million to clean up.

The EPA is currently trying to knuckle down on all of these nasty side effects.

Dirty dancing: Already-skittish members of Congress are pushing back hard against the EPA's proposal to classify coal ash as a hazardous waste. And utility companies in the Eastern U.S. are gearing up to battle new "transport rules" proposed by the EPA last month that would require power plants in 31 states and the District of Columbia to cut emissions of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides.

Let the flames begin.

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Randy Rieland is a writer who lives in Washington, D.C., but tries to spend as many weekends as possible at his cottage in the Shenandoah Mountains of Virginia. He also actually remembers the first Earth Day. You can email him at randy.rieland[at]gmail[dot]com.

Washington Post Speaks "the Truth About Global Warming" (*Treehugger*)

After I spent a good chunk of the morning penning a criticism of mainstream media's difficulty in covering climate change -- particularly, this New York Times piece that's drawn the ire of green blogs everywhere -- I feel that it's only fair to give credit where it's due. See, the Washington Post also published an op-ed about climate change that's actually pretty great. Perhaps the days of nonsensical Sarah Palin-authored columns about climate policy are over -- just check out this passage, which gets right to the point about the current state of climate change in our culture:

From the WaPo: IN A DEPRESSING case of irony by juxtaposition, the death of climate change legislation in the Senate has been followed by the appearance of two government reports in the past week that underscore the overwhelming scientific case for global warming -- and go out of the way to repudiate skeptics.

First came a report on global climate from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which confirmed that the 2000s were by far the warmest decade in the instrumental record -- as were, in their turns, the 1980s and the 1990s. Unlike year-to-year fluctuations, these 10-year shifts are statistically significant. Further, the report notes that it derived its conclusions from an array of data sources -- not just the land-surface readings that doubters challenge -- from ocean heat uptake to melting land ice to sea level rise.

Precisely. The case for climate change is now scientifically stronger than it's ever been before -- and yet we squander time laboring over some email correspondence and political horse races. The second half of the WaPo editorial focuses on the EPA's repudiation of the various coal groups and organizations that opposed its ability to regulate greenhouse gases as a harmful

pollutant, which again drives home the fact that it understands the scope of the threat posed by climate change.

It's also a pleasant surprise that the WaPo published the piece due to its past tendency of letting the likes of Palin and George Will use the space as a political platform to (incorrectly) rail against climate science. The op-ed, which I really do recommend reading in full, ends on this note: "Many climate-change skeptics will simply dismiss these reports as more evidence of a sprawling conspiracy instead of what they really are: yet more affirmation of the risks humanity runs if it continues to pump carbon into the atmosphere."

Sad but true.

MINING

Save the MN Boundary Waters from Sulfide Mining! (*DAILY KOS*)

The Boundary Waters (BWCAW), Minnesota's pristine wilderness area, is a national treasure. Every year, more than 250,000 people escape to its remote lakes and forests to canoe, hike, camp, and fish. In 1978 the Boundary Waters area was established as a protected wilderness, but it is not safe from new threats.

A new and dangerous type of mining that has never been done in Minnesota is being proposed near the Boundary Waters. Sulfide (also called "hard-rock" or "non-ferrous") mining often creates acid mine drainage, and can leak sulfuric acid and heavy metal contaminants into nearby waters.

Many of the proposed mines are right on the edge of the Boundary Waters, and alongside precious waters like the South Kiwishiwi and Bald Eagle Lake in the wilderness. If built, they would not only threaten these waters, but the Boundary waters as well. One company is already undertaking exploratory drilling under Birch Lake, whose water runs right back into the wilderness.

We need to make sure the Boundary Waters are protected as a pristine area for generations to come. We're asking the EPA to block any new mines that could pollute the Boundary Waters, degrade water quality, or exceed water quality standards.

Find out what you can do about it over the fold...

First, you can visit Environment Minnesota (from whom I've quoted above) and join the campaign.

This type of mining has been done in Idaho and Colorado and resulted in sulfuric acid in rivers - a cleanup that can sometimes be impossible and almost always is paid for by the taxpayers.

The mining companies, as always, say that they can contain the pollution, but in a peer-reviewed study of what these companies say they can do and what they actually do found that they polluted 3 out of 4 times.

The good news is that on Wednesday August 4th, the EPA and Dept of Interior will be in Minneapolis to hear from people that actually use the BWCAW and want to see them preserved for future generations.

It's our chance to literally "stand up" for the Boundary Waters and be heard. This public listening session and discussion is an opportunity for leaders of the America's Great Outdoors Initiative to hear your support for protecting the pristine wilderness, so future generations of Minnesotans have the chance to canoe and camp with their families and friends just as we have.

Listening Session and Discussion Information:

When: Wednesday, August 4, 4:00 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

What: Public Listening Session on America's Great Outdoors Initiative

Where: Ted Mann Concert Hall, 2128 Fourth Street, Minneapolis, MN 55455

Who: Representatives from the Department of the Interior, USDA, EPA, and the Council on Environmental Quality will be present to hear your thoughts and to participate in a conversation with you about land conservation, recreation, and reconnecting Americans to the great outdoors.

This event is free and open to the public.

TOXICS

The Real Deal With Cesium (*Huffington Post*)

The month of July has been a big one for the chemical element Cesium. Produced naturally through the nuclear fuel cycle and used in a variety of applications from agriculture to cancer treatment, it is highly radioactive in isotopic form Cs-137.

The idea has been floated for a long time of using cesium in a radioactive "dirty bomb," which wouldn't have the same explosive power as a uranium or plutonium nuclear bomb but would contaminate land, water supplies and living organisms, including people. In March 2002, Henry Kelly, President of the Federation of American Scientists, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the possibility of constructing dirty bombs using three different radioactive elements -- cesium, cobalt and americium. He demonstrated that if a cesium-137 bomb were exploded using 10 pounds of TNT at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, the resulting contamination might look something like this:

Where the innermost ring represents one cancer death per 100 people due to remaining radiation, the middle ring represents one cancer death per 1,000 people, and the outer ring represents one cancer death per 10,000 people. Moreover, the EPA would recommend decontamination or destruction of the entire area within the outermost ring.

So since cesium can be stolen from a hospital and thus can be more easily acquired than, say, uranium or plutonium, it wouldn't be a stretch to imagine a terrorist group acquiring enough cesium to construct a barrage of low-explosive, highly radioactive bombs and blanketing a major city with them.

It's a good thing people are paying attention to this terrifying possibility: during the month of July alone, cesium and its relatives have gotten some great coverage, though not in the mainstream media. The Global Security Newswire reported on July 6 that federal and New York state authorities, together with people from the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), collaborated on removing a small amount of cesium-137 from St. Vincent's Hospital in Manhattan. Two weeks later, on July 22, the same media outlet reported that a lead-lined safe containing radioactive "seeds" used in cancer treatment had gone missing from a hospital in Illinois.

But here's the scariest incident of attempted or actual cesium theft or disappearance: on July 10, five men were arrested in Pretoria, South Africa, for attempting to sell a cesium device for $6 million dollars to undercover agents posing as potential black-market buyers. Rachel Maddow on MSNBC did a good job of covering the matter in her show on July 19. You can watch the six-minute clip here.

If anyone comes across more incidents of cesium theft or disappearance, anywhere in the world and no matter how spurious the report, please let me know.

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