

Impacts of the Gulf Oil Spill Series
Managing Environmental Impacts of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill
Event Summary
By Matthew Ward

Many of the earth's resources are found in environmentally sensitive areas. As we consume these resources at an increasing rate, companies are forced to develop more technologically advanced methods to explore, extract and transport these resources without significantly impacting the surrounding environment or local communities.

The Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill of April 2010 has had immediate and long-lasting impacts on the Gulf Coast ecosystem, many of which are poorly understood to this day. This event has sparked a national debate as to whether increasingly complex extraction methods are too big a risk to the environment to be carried out in sensitive areas. Some say it is too dangerous, while others accept it as the risk we take to perpetuate the conveniences of modern day society.

On March 3rd, the Center for Strategic and International Studies invited a panel of speakers to address the environmental issues that have arisen in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. David M. Kennedy, Assistant Administrator for National Ocean Service at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), presented NOAA's role since the spill occurred, including conducting science to inform decision-makers, keeping seafood safe and assessing and restoring damaged natural resources.

Elgie Holstein, Senior Director for Strategic Planning at the Environmental Defense Fund, presented the point of view of the environmentalists, noting that the community as a whole took too long to recognize the severity of the impacts, but did come together to compile and publicly share information and facts about the disaster. Juliet Eilperin, a staff writer with The Washington Post, offered an on-the-ground perspective of the spill clean-up, fact finding and research, and impacts on local livelihoods.

The panelists spoke about the myriad of management issues, including technical shortcomings on well-design specifics and the complacency of government regulators that may have had a hand in the Deepwater Horizon spill. Although there has been much public outrage and criticism regarding the management and clean up, Elgie Holstein pointed out that the bottom line is we cannot just get better at cleaning up our messes, we must get better at preventing them from happening.

David Kennedy started off the discussion with a timeline of events that took place. He explained that immediately following the oil rig explosion, relief crews were faced with a number of new challenges because of the scale of the Horizon spill and the location and depth at which it occurred. He referenced one of the most publicized and heavily criticized response tactics, the use of chemical dispersants that break down the crude before it washes up on shore. He said that although dispersants are typically used on surface oil spills, they had never been tested on the type of crude that was gushing from the deep water well (Louisiana Sweet Crude), nor at the depths at which it was being applied. Kennedy noted that further scientific research is needed by the National Labs or the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to quell the scientific uncertainty and to ensure the safety of these chemicals in all new applications in which they may be used.

After the application of dispersants, much of the subsequent clean-up efforts were made by the Coast Guard in collaboration with BP, according to Juliet Eilperin, who herself took a trip on one of the clean-up boats with a crew from NOAA, BP, the Coast Guard and others. Following the containment and capping of the leaking well, a Natural Resource Damage Assessment was initiated by NOAA to identify the most pressing environmental concerns. A preliminary assessment, to see what damage has been done to the natural resource by collecting time-sensitive data and reviewing scientific literature about the released substance is underway, to be completed shortly. The next step, which involves the creation of a restoration plan in which NOAA quantifies injuries and identifies possible restoration projects, has been hampered by the lack of baseline information about the health of the Gulf Coast ecosystem prior to the spill. As Mr. Holstein stated, "Gulf Coast degradation did not start with the (well) blow up, and did not end with its capping".

The panelists raised a number of questions regarding funding for future restoration projects. According to Kennedy, funding from the National Resource Damage Assessment must be spent on immediate damages and cannot be used on land marred by long-term degradation activities. Other damages, including those stemming from violations by the Clean Water Act, will also be pursued. While these have traditionally gone into the general fund, President Obama has said that 80% of the money from the CWA must be spent on Gulf Restoration projects. However, it remains unclear who will be able to spend this money, where, when and for what reasons.

Near the end of the event, Elgie Holstein presented his three-legged-stool vision to address the main concerns of the future of oil and gas exploration in the United States. The first leg would require drilling companies and rig operators to provide regulators with new technical specifications which would allow them to develop new technology standards and effective oversight programs. The second leg looks to the Marine Well Containment Company to work across the oil industry to collect and share technology and expertise that will limit damage from future spills. Finally, the third leg would establish an advisory committee, similar to those found in the nuclear power and waste industry, to help define the technical questions that need to be answered about equipment and standards as the complexity of deep water drilling gets more and more technical.

In conclusion, Mr. Holstein reminded the audience that oil and gas will continue to play a crucial role in our energy mix for the foreseeable future. Bearing that in mind, he proposed that better safety programs and regulations should be developed to ensure that companies and governments alike are using the best technologies available to tap our deep water resources, in order to continue to provide a secure and stable supply of oil and gas to our domestic market. Looking beyond the blame, the panelists made it evident that the oil and gas industry, as well as the federal government, have to reestablish public trust and confidence to ensure that our natural resources are being properly protected.