

Oil Gusher in Gulf: Energy Gluttony, not Oil Addiction, is Greater Challenge

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
05 May 2010

It's crazy that everyone was blindsided by the unprecedented BP oil rig explosion and oil well disaster, when it or a similar event had to happen eventually. Indeed, we now have a "new" wrinkle for petrocollapse. Petrocollapse has mostly referred to the effects of peak oil, but all is ecological in the final analysis.

Most people paying attention to the world at large know that millions of gallons of crude oil have been loosed, still gushing uncontrollably, threatening not only the Gulf of Mexico but beyond. Our report suggests more than clean-up and better oversight: the Committee Against Oil Exploration.

The scope of the ecological disaster is unknown, but at this rate it will exceed past record oil spills -- with the hurricane season about to start.. The only silver lining may be a wake-up call regarding the profligate use of not only oil but energy in general. We have become accustomed to it and brainwashed to believe there is no other way to live. However, most of the opinion pieces in the news media, including progressive websites, don't get it: the dominant critique is that there are some bad actors and policies that must be opposed. But opposing the system by choosing a local, ecological lifestyle gets no mention.

As a former oil industry insider turned environmental campaigner, I was not surprised by the explosion and leak. Numbed a little bit more, I monitored the disaster and proceeded with other projects such as climate change activism (so oil-related, of course). Now to advance a "new" idea on the Gulf disaster and the bigger picture -- if there is one bigger than what is likely to be global eco-catastrophe emanating from the Gulf. First, dispense with the noise and propaganda:

(1) The New York Times wants us to relax about the catastrophe, just as it doesn't want us to believe peak oil is real or imminent: The "ruptured well, currently pouring an estimated 210,000 gallons of oil a day into the gulf, could flow for years and still not begin to approach the 36 billion gallons of oil spilled by retreating Iraqi forces when they left Kuwait in 1991. It is not yet close to the magnitude of the Ixtoc I blowout in the Bay of Campeche in Mexico in 1979, which spilled an estimated 140 million gallons of crude before the gusher could be stopped.

"And it will have to get much worse before it approaches the impact of the Exxon Valdez accident of 1989, which contaminated 1,300 miles of largely untouched shoreline and killed tens of thousands of seabirds, otters and seals along with 250 eagles and 22 killer whales." [Gulf Oil Spill Is Bad, but How Bad?]

Despite the corporate spin and industrialized people's oil addiction, it seems a no-brainer that we must all acknowledge that we have created a tipping point from which there is no return. The previous model of energy production and consumption will be rejected either by humans or Mother Earth.

Just as certain parties hold on to nuclear weapons and nuclear power, the end of that infinitely, insanely dangerous and even longer-lasting fiasco probably must come with a wake-up call: a tragic nuclear explosion to rouse people to decisive, curative action. When people do not acknowledge or react strongly to a threat, they are like sheep walking to the slaughter.

Yet we still hear plaintive, myopic calls -- bleat, bleat -- for replacing fossil energy with alternatives (including a "clean energy future" for the billions of us dependent on irreplaceable petroleum). Technology is no doubt here and can be helpful, but relying on continued proliferation of technology for more consuming of non-renewable resources has no future. Those who ignore this also tend to fail to take population size into account.

Even more egregious, the oil and gas industry warns that more U.S. drilling must occur if there is to be energy independence and Congressional climate protection legislation. The term "ingenuous" rings accurately. But are we truly upset at these masters of the universe or not?

Falling for these approaches probably will not work, by sheer virtue of the ecological disaster's magnitude and toxic effects. It may be the right timing to succeed finally with a permanent halt to oil exploration. The movement to try to achieve it has been tiny since Culture Change reached out to anti-offshore drilling activists in 2002, but great ideas finally have their day.

Let us dispense with some less than helpful reformist distractions:

(2) Slick Operator: The BP I've Known Too Well

By Greg Palast (truthout.org 05 May 2010)

Palast skewers BP so well that a reader might be inclined to think all that's needed is to drill and consume petroleum more carefully. All petroleum is in the end burned or spilled. That and the corporate economy are what need to be dealt with in terms of abolishing the system. Impossible, yes, if you keep buying gasoline or diesel, plastic, and get your food from vast distances.

truthout.org

(3) The Rebirth of Regulation

By Robert Reich, former Clinton administration official: "What do oil giant BP, the mining company Massey Energy and Goldman Sachs have in common? They're all big firms involved in massive plunder."

Actually, a lot of smaller firms engaging in smaller plunder such as extractive industry add up to massive plunder that has been going on before Reich's rogues gallery of bad guys. We have to change the structure of society and our very culture.

robertreich.org

(4) Brazen oil addicts of the highest order, capitalists in the petroleum field, are pretending to care about the climate. It is not gratuitous unkindness to point out that such a position is only a little right to the Obama Administration, which just prior to the BP blowout came out with its kinder, gentler Drill Baby Drill policy.

Datamonitor said: "The US is struggling with a stifling oil import dependency, which demands increased domestic production.

"The US had been extremely frugal in allowing the development of its offshore regions in the past so the recent opening of some of these regions was a welcome relief. Nonetheless, this disaster prompted a predictable response from California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who has now confirmed that the state will not be pursuing any offshore plans.

"Datamonitor's Global Oil and Gas Analyzer draws attention to the production and trade forecasts for the US' key suppliers and highlights their poor correlation with US demand growth. The picture is not ideal for a country whose energy security is already weak. It will be even worse if drilling in the Gulf is delayed or banned as an estimated 76 million barrels per day were due to be extracted in 2013 from approximately 40 new fields.

"Most importantly of all, Obama's decision to open certain offshore regions to drilling was the key to gaining Republican support for a vital climate change bill that would have once and for all resolved the country's energy security issues."
datamonitor.com

(5) Alarming background on the challenges facing the BP gusher on the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico:

"Air pollution world wide is reaching levels that are at the limits of the environment to take the demands. This increase in energy has to come from somewhere else." -- with comments from Paul Noel.

The writer's knowledge of the issues is formidable regarding issues of pipes, wells, explosives, pressures, etc. He fears greatly for the consequences of the blowout but still supports the petroleum industry, along with a move toward alternatives.

pesn.com

Paul Noel, 52, works as Software Engineer (as Contractor) for the US Army at Redstone Arsenal, Alabama. He supplies extensive expertise in understanding the Oil and Gas industry.

(6) A recent column in Grist.org opined that the massive BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is "a prime opportunity for progressives and clean-energy advocates to demonstrate the desperate need for new forms of energy. It's a prime opportunity to pressure the Senate to put a price on carbon pollution and invest in the R&D necessary to jump-start a clean energy economy."

Don't waste this crisis: Wake up, Obama. The Gulf spill is our big chance

This view is the dominant sentiment and agenda of the technofix movement, that some people call the environmental movement. The problem with clamoring for "clean energy" or a "clean energy economy" is that the promise or fantasy delays the inevitable: slashing energy use abruptly. Since most energy use is the polluting kind that also warms the globe, one just can't miss with curtailing energy use.

Enough information already: oil emancipation now!

Collecting information and arguing for perfect knowledge wastes precious time. Such a mind-set also allows for inaction as the modus operandi. While it is significant that "95 percent of Atlantis' subsea welding records did not receive final approval" (Truthout.org, Jason Leopold's report of April 30), what more do we really need to know about oil other than it is a completely polluting proposition, and spills are inevitable?

Rather than try to reform the way oil is extracted, we need to stop it. After all, even if extracted and transported as carefully as possible, the refining process and end-use mean that all oil is burned or spilled. The Earth is too small for this to continue if nature as we know it is to endure.

Committee Against Oil Exploration

CAOE is not only against offshore oil drilling, but against looking for oil on land or sea. The next step in thinking along these lines includes getting rid of cars. Almost as urgent is to turn back the plastic plague (it's from petroleum). By rejecting the purchase and use of questionable, redundant modern appliances that suck energy, we rapidly close in on ending the terror of oil. It's really not so hard to keep one's money in one's pocket than to give it to oil and car corporations. (See numerous Culture Change articles and past issues of the magazine including its predecessor the Auto-Free Times).

What's more, if enough consumers withheld their purchasing power and did not buy new cars, the entire economy would enter a necessary, inevitable transformation to bioregional economics. Crash of the petroleum infrastructure and populations depending on it is ugly, but the last several decades have only assured it. The local economy for a bioregion is the future, based on subsistence rather than a clean-energy Utopia powered by renewable energy for a global economy. Renewable energy technology does not and will not substitute for the diverse, flexible products from petroleum, such as in providing agricultural chemicals, asphalt, plastic, tires, pharmaceutical drugs, etc. -- on a meaningful scale.

It is time to take action instead of wringing our hands and hoping for a safe future at the hands of people who have brought us everything related to the BP oil spill: oil wars, urban sprawl, climate distortion, and the plastic disaster. See CAOE ("K.O.!!") and contact us to become involved. Support Culture Change so we can keep getting the truth out: culturechange.org/donate.html

Listen to a Gulf Coast radio show on the ecology, politics and lifestyle issues relating to the oil disaster (guests include oil analyst and environmentalist Jan Lundberg). First aired May 5; duration one hour:

Drill Baby Drill? - What do you say now -- hosted by Vincent Clark:
blogtalkradio.com

Further reading:

Bolivia contamina menos y sufre más - Bolivia contaminates less but suffers more (a look at consumption in the second "poorest" country in the Western Hemisphere.)