

Submit Query

May 4, 2010



Dan Froomkin
froomkin@huffingtonpost.com | HuffPost

Reporting



NOAA Warned Interior It Was Underestimating Threat Of Serious Spill

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

What's Your Reaction?

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.'"

Story continues below

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.

Dan Froomkin is senior Washington correspondent for the Huffington Post. You can send him an e-mail, bookmark his page, subscribe to RSS feed, follow him on Twitter, friend him on Facebook, and/or become a fan and get e-mail alerts when he writes.

Get HuffPost Politics On Twitter, Facebook, and Google Buzz! Subscribe to the new HuffPost Hill newsletter! Know something we don't? E-mail us at huffpolitics@huffingtonpost.com

oil spill		
Videos	Web	Images

[Report Corrections](#)

More in Politics...

Comments
3,082
Pending Comments
0
View FAQ
Page: [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#) [Next](#) [Last](#) [»](#) (42 pages total)
Show: [Newest](#) [First](#)

Page: [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#) [Next](#) [Last](#) [»](#) (42 pages total)

