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Industry Doesn't Step Up

Who is to blame for last month's catastrophic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico? The other guy. At least that's what three oil executives, predictably and cynically, told a Senate hearing on Tuesday.

The Obama administration and Congress are going to have to press a lot harder to figure out what went wrong and what must be changed — including how the industry needs to be regulated — to ensure this never happens again.

There is no question about the scale of the destruction. The blowout on a deep-water drilling rig has already dumped nearly 3.5 million gallons of oil into the gulf, and the companies involved have yet to figure out how to stop it. If left unchecked, the spill will almost certainly inflict terrible damage on Louisiana's coastline and its fishing industry, and possibly other gulf states.

The hearings produced almost none of the answers needed. The BP America chairman, Lamar McKay, blamed a malfunctioning blowout preventer installed by Transocean, the operator of the drilling rig. Transocean's boss, Steven Newman, said the problem may have been a mishandling of the cement that is supposed to keep gas from escaping up the well pipe to the surface. Tim Probert, a president of Halliburton, which was responsible for the cement, suggested that his company was only following instructions from BP.

Round and round the blame game went — the "liability chase," Senator Robert Menendez of New Jersey called it.

The only sign of progress for the day — there was not any in the gulf — came from Interior Secretary Ken Salazar. He announced that the administration intended to split the federal agency that oversees offshore drilling into two parts — one to award drilling leases and collect fees and royalties (worth $13 billion a year) and the other to inspect oil rigs and write and enforce safety regulations. He argued that the move would eliminate conflicts of interest both "real and perceived."

The tales of how the agency, the Minerals Management Service, was corrupted by industry in the Bush years (employees took gifts, steered contracts to favored clients and engaged in drugs and sex with oil company employees) are legendary. Mr. Salazar has taken steps to change that culture.

Only now, after this disastrous spill, are we learning how even when the agency's regulators tried to do their jobs they were repeatedly rolled or rebuffed by industry.

There have been widespread reports, for instance, that the Minerals Management Service had asked industry for more backup systems for the blowout preventers but then accepted industry's assurances that the devices were virtually foolproof. There also have been reports that some agency officials wanted to subject the BP project to a complete environmental impact review but, in the end, accepted BP's assurances that a huge oil spill was unlikely.

The agency clearly failed to press industry to modernize the equipment it uses to combat spills. The technology on display in the gulf — the booms, skimmers and chemical dispersants — seems largely unchanged from the days of the Exxon Valdez disaster in 1989.

We will not know what went wrong this time until the Interior Department and Congress finish their investigations. What we do know is that the country deserves a far more transparent, far less self-serving response from BP and its subcontractors.

We are also waiting to hear Mr. Salazar's plans for building a robust and impartial regulatory system, one able to ride herd on a large and lucrative industry that cannot be trusted to police itself.