

the environment

Earth Talk — Questions and answers about the environment

Q Given the huge oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in April, isn't it high time the government put a stop to offshore oil drilling once and for all? Short of banning it altogether, what can be done to prevent explosions, leaks and spills moving forward?

A. The explosion of BP's Deepwater Horizon drill rig on April 20 and the resultant oil spill now consuming coastal regions of the Gulf of Mexico could not have come at a worse time for President Obama, who only recently renewed a push to expand drilling off the coast of Virginia and other regions of the U.S.

The debate over whether or not to tap offshore oil reserves with dangerous drilling equipment has been raging since extraction methods became feasible in the 1950s. It heated up in 2008 when George W. Bush convinced Congress to lift a 27-year-old moratorium on offshore drilling outside of the already developed western Gulf of Mexico and some areas off Alaska.

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Despite public protests, cash-strapped governments of several coastal states wanted the moratorium lifted given the potential for earning windfall revenues.

Barack Obama had historically toed the Democratic party line on offshore drilling—don't allow it—but changed his tune during his 2008 campaign to compromise with pro-drilling Republicans if they would play ball with him on his carbon emissions reduction and energy efficiency initiatives.

Then on March 31, three weeks prior to the Deepwater Horizon explosion, which killed 11 workers and has caused untold environmental damage, Obama called for new offshore drilling in the Atlantic from Delaware to central Florida and in Alaska's untapped northern waters. He also asked Congress to lift the ban on offshore drilling in the oil-rich eastern Gulf of Mexico, just 125 miles from Florida's beaches.

A key aspect of Obama's new plan is to assess the potential risks and benefits of each

specific offshore site before drilling there can commence. While Obama's plan wouldn't grant any new leases until 2012, the Deepwater Horizon problem is casting a long shadow over the public comment process now going on in Virginia and other coastal states otherwise ready to sign on the dotted line for exploratory wells to go into their offshore waters.

Whether or not Congress and the American people are willing to let their government expand on what appears already to be some risky business is anybody's guess at this point.

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A small fire on the Deepwater Horizon in 2005 was found to be caused by human error, and most analysts agree some kind of bad judgment call also likely caused the rig's ultimate demise. The MMS says it was already in the process of drafting new regulations that would require rig operators to develop programs focused on preventing human error, including operations audits once every three years for each rig.

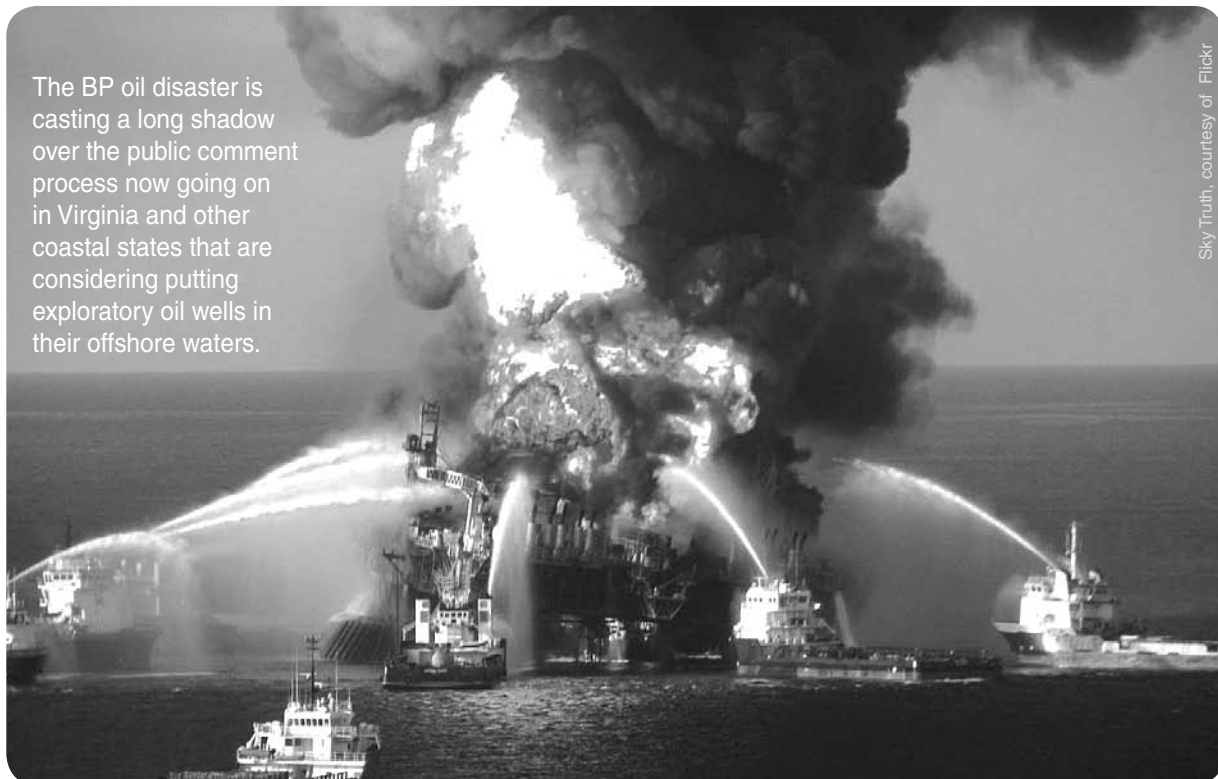
Some Congress members don't think the new regulations are enough, especially in the wake of the BP tragedy. U.S. Senator Bill Nelson, a Florida Democrat who has led opposition to offshore drilling, has now called for a congressional investigation of safety practices at offshore oil rigs, and has asked the U.S. Interior Department to undertake a full review of all U.S. drilling accidents over at least the last decade.

RESOURCES:
• BP, www.bp.com
• U.S. Minerals and Management Service, www.mms.gov

Q Is it possible to purchase household cleaners whose ingredients and final product are not tested on animals.

A. According to most animal advocates, the fact that manufacturers of household cleaners still use animals to test the toxicity of their products is not only inhumane—why should innocent animals have to suffer and die so we can get our floors a little cleaner?—but also illogical, as modern lab tests not involving living creatures can discern more practical information faster and for less money.

The BP oil disaster is casting a long shadow over the public comment process now going on in Virginia and other coastal states that are considering putting exploratory oil wells in their offshore waters.



Sky Truth, courtesy of Flickr

Another problem with animal testing is that its findings don't always successfully predict real-world human outcomes. According to the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), for instance, animal tests on rats and rabbits over several decades “failed to predict the birth defect-causing properties of PCBs, industrial solvents and many drugs, while cancer tests in rats and mice failed to detect the hazards of asbestos, benzene, cigarette smoke, and many other substances.”

The group blames these shortcomings of animal testing for “delaying consumer and worker protection measures by decades in some cases.” While animal product testing is still allowed in the U.S. (researchers here are continuing to improve alternative testing meth-

in the U.S. and elsewhere away from harming animals for consumers' sake.

In the meantime, if you're looking to avoid household cleaners that subject critters to poisons, you've never had so many choices. Back in 1996 eight national animal protection groups banded together to form the Coalition for Consumer Information on Cosmetics (CCIC) in order to unify behind one standard for so-called “cruelty-free” cosmetics and household products.

The resulting Leaping Bunny certification logo (shown at left) is now proudly displayed on the packaging of more than 300 cosmetics and household products for sale across the U.S. The shopping guide on the coalition's LeapingBunny.org website points consumers to



various household cleaning and other types of products that don't contain any ingredients subject to new animal testing.

Some of the top household cleaning products that meet Leaping Bunny criteria and are practical for a wide range of domestic tasks come from companies such as Seventh Generation, Earth Friendly Products, Earth Alive, Citra Solv, Nature Clean and Vermont



Soapworks, among many others. You can order these products online via websites like Planet Natural and Green Feet, and many are sold in natural food stores.

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RESOURCES:
• HSUS, www.hsus.org
• LeapingBunny.org, www.leapingbunny.org
• Planet Natural, www.planetnatural.com
• Green Feet, www.greenfeet.com

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