

Obama administration blocked efforts to stop BP oil drilling before explosion

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In 2009, the Obama administration intervened to support the reversal of a court order that would have halted offshore oil drilling in the Gulf of Mexico. Obama's Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, who has long had close ties to the industry, specifically cited BP's Deepwater Horizon operation as one that should be allowed to go forward, according to a group involved in the court case.

A Washington DC Appeals Court ruled in April 2009 that the Bush administration's five-year plan for offshore oil and gas drilling (covering 2007 to 2012) was not based on a proper review of the environmental impact of the drilling. Only days before the ruling, the Obama administration had granted BP a "categorical exclusion," exempting it from an environmental impact study for the Deepwater Horizon project.

The American Petroleum Institute, the oil industry trade group, intervened to reverse the court order, and was backed by the administration.

Kierán Suckling, executive director and founder the Center for Biological Diversity, which was involved in the original lawsuit, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Salazar "filed a special motion asking the court to lift the injunction, and he cited the BP drilling several times by name in the request."

In July 2009, the court ruled that drilling in both the Gulf and off the coast of Alaska could continue, on the condition that the administration conduct a study of the potential environmental risks. This study has yet to be completed.

Salazar praised the decision at the time, saying it allowed the administration to go forward with "a comprehensive energy plan," including the BP project and a sale of leases for drilling in the Gulf.

Even since the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon less than three weeks ago, the Interior Department's

Minerals Management Services (MMS) has continued to grant "categorical exclusions" to oil and gas companies, allowing them to bypass environmental studies.

The administration has publicly announced that no new offshore drilling grants will be issued until a review, to be completed by the end of the month. Nevertheless, at least 27 exemptions have been granted, including one for a BP exploration plan for drilling at more than 4,000 feet. Another exemption was granted to Anadarko Petroleum Corporation for an exploration plan at more than 9,000 feet. The Deepwater Horizon was drilling at about 5,000 feet.

"The same problems we saw under the Bush administration are continuing under Obama," Suckling said. "The change in political parties has done very little in terms of corporate domination of the political system. Who got to vote on turning over our natural resources to private corporations? The whole system is corrupt from the bottom up."

The Obama administration's announcement earlier this year that he would expand offshore oil drilling was a clear sop for the oil industry, as was his earlier decision to appoint Salazar as Interior Secretary. Suckling noted that as a Senator for Colorado Salazar supported the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act of 2006, which expanded drilling. Salazar received money from BP, and when he became Interior Secretary he brought several BP officials on his staff.

These latest revelations come as the haphazard and experimental attempts by BP and the government to stop oil from flowing into the Gulf have failed.

Oil is now beginning to appear on the coast, from Louisiana to parts of Alabama. Tar balls have washed up on the shore of an Alabama barrier island, according to the Associated Press.

Oil is also dispersed throughout the Mississippi Delta region. According to the *Financial Times*, a vessel it has chartered with Canadian oil spill consultants “located patches of thick crude oil on a beach at the mouth of the South Pass, one of the navigable channels of the Mississippi. ‘This is bad,’ said Dec Doran of Ontario-based Oil Spill Control Services, as he took samples from a saucer-sized patch of red-brown crude, the consistency of peanut butter. ‘If nothing is done, this will take 10 years to disperse.’”

On Saturday, the cofferdam—a 100-ton containment box or “dome” that BP sought to place over one of the major leaks—had to be removed after it was clogged by gas and water crystals. The project, which was presented as the most feasible short-term option for slowing the leak, was highly experimental, untested at the depths BP was drilling. The clog developed even before operators could hook up a tube intended to direct the leaking oil into ships above.

While BP has said it will try again, government officials have begun floating another, even more improbable scheme. Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen, who is overseeing the government’s response, outlined on Sunday what he called a “junk shot” tactic. “They’re going to take a bunch of debris—shredded up tires, golf balls, and things like that—under very high pressure and shoot it into the [blowout] preventer,” he said on CBS’s *Face the Nation*.

These desperate measures are intended to give the appearance of action and hide the fact that neither the administration nor BP had in place any plans to deal with the failure of a blowout preventer, an entirely foreseeable event.

The actions could well have the effect of making the spill worse by damaging the pipe, which is restricting the flow of oil. Currently, oil is spewing out at a rate of between 5,000 barrels a day (government estimate) and 25,000 barrels a day (estimate of several scientists). If the pipe completely fails, the leak rate could soar to as high as 60,000 to 100,000 barrels a day.

At the same time, BP and government officials have noted that all attempts could fail. “It’s very difficult to predict whether we will find solutions,” said Doug Suttles, BP’s chief operating officer. “This dome is no silver bullet to stop the leak,” Rear Adm. Mary Landry of the Coast Guard acknowledged.

The major step intended to block off the well

completely—drilling a relief well—will take several months to complete and is not guaranteed to work. In the worst-case scenario, which appears increasingly likely, the eruption of oil could continue until the entire reserve is drained—tens if not hundreds of millions of gallons of oil.



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