

National Commission on oil spill covers up for BP, government

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The National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling held its first public meeting in New Orleans on Monday. From the outset, it was clear the hearing would be a toothless exercise in which the reality of the disaster in the Gulf of Mexico would find no expression.

The commission, appointed by President Obama in May, is co-chaired by former Democratic Senator and Florida Governor Bob Graham and William Reilly, who led the Environmental Protection Agency under the Reagan administration, during the time of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill. Reilly has spent the past 17 years on the board of energy giant ConocoPhillips.

The stated aim of the commission is to investigate the causes of the Deepwater Horizon disaster and make recommendations on how to better respond to or prevent any further spills in the future. The commission has no authority to employ or enforce any recommendations it may come up with.

While the commission is tasked with investigating the causes of the BP oil spill, no attempt will be made during the two-day hearing to examine the true source of the disaster, namely the private ownership and control of the energy industry. There will be no examination of decades worth of corporate deregulation or the complicity of the government, including the Obama administration, in making a catastrophe of this kind all but inevitable.

The Obama administration, together with the media, has been working to defuse public outrage over BP and the government response. The committee began its hearing by giving both BP and the US Coast Guard a free forum to provide the official story on spill recovery efforts without challenging any of their assertions.

The commission heard testimony from Kent Wells, BP's senior vice president of exploration and production in North America, who provided a status update on the drilling of relief wells and ongoing containment efforts. Questioning of Wells was extremely brief, with no member of the panel asking follow-up questions or daring to challenge any of Wells' claims.

Wells said of the ongoing efforts to reach the leaking Macondo well with relief wells currently being drilled, that BP "will intercept the Macondo well towards the end of July. At that point we have to do the kill procedure." This procedure could take up to a few weeks, said Wells, adding, "The kill procedure goes into August." In fact it is not at all certain that the relief well will intercept the leaking well on the first try, and several scientists have warned that the procedure will not work if the inside of the well has itself been damaged.

Asked if there were plans in place should the relief wells fail to stop the flow of oil, Wells said the first "relief well is very close and we expect that to work. If the relief wells for whatever reason have failed, the other option is how do we install a permanent collection system. We're working on pipelines to other facilities. We believe these would be things we could implement by late August-early September if the relief wells didn't work. So we *are* thinking beyond the relief wells."

Commission members asked Wells why the oil industry did not anticipate an event such as the Deepwater Horizon blowout. In response, Wells repeatedly referred to the unprecedented nature of the event. While Wells agreed that "we need to learn everything we can possibly learn from this event," his clear aim was to portray the blowout as an event which no one could have predicted, and which would in all likelihood not occur again. There was clearly no need, in his view, to take any regulatory action or to hold anyone accountable.

The claim that the oil spill was unforeseeable—a claim repeated by the Obama administration—is simply a lie. Blowouts are common, and key weaknesses in blowout preventers were well documented. On top of this, BP, with the rubber stamp of the government, cut corners on essential safety procedures in the weeks preceding the spill. It was only a matter of time before a catastrophic event such as this took place.

Wells repeatedly dodged questions regarding any industry-wide changes that might be necessary, saying, "Right now

I'm totally focused on the response to this well." The commission did not press Wells to go beyond this evasion.

The commission also heard testimony from Coast Guard Rear Admiral Peter Neffenger, the deputy incident commander in the Gulf. Neffenger called the Coast Guard's inept response—which has included working with BP to block public access to the worst-affected regions—the “most complex in our nation's history.”

Chairman Graham asked Neffenger how long spill response efforts would continue following the permanent capping of the leaking Macondo well. The admiral replied, “I think it's going to go on for some period of time. There's a fair amount of residual oil that's in the environment now.” Neffenger added that he expected see, “many weeks or perhaps months of tar balls and the like coming to shore.”

When asked about the use of the chemical dispersant Corexit 9500 in the Gulf and how the use of the dispersant had changed over time, Neffenger remained vague. The admiral could not clarify the amount of chemical dispersant that had been used. He would only say that, “There have been times when the amount of dispersant used has been higher... Some days are higher than others, I should say.”

Despite health and environmental concerns about Corexit—including from the Environmental Protection Agency itself—BP continues to pour millions of gallons of the substance into the Gulf, largely to force the oil beneath the surface and out of sight. Local residents have raised concerns that the chemical has been sprayed close to shore, in violation of regulations. Ecologists are also pointing to signs of a growing “dead zone” in the Gulf caused by oil that has sunk into the water column.

As Neffenger spoke about the use of chemical dispersants, an audience member stood and spoke out in protest. While most of the woman's comments went unheard by the microphones, she was clearly attempting to challenge the admiral on the use of the chemical dispersant. She shouted, “I can't sit here and listen to all this when BP's blocking LSU from doing any kind of research!” She was then escorted from the room by a security guard. Following the protest, Admiral Neffenger added of the dispersant, “It is not the desired first choice, but it is a tool you sometimes turn to when you don't think you have another option.”

Following the status updates on the spill response, the meeting also heard from representatives of small businesses in the Gulf region who testified to the economic impact of the spill.

The commission heard from Sal Sunseri, the owner of P&J Oysters, which has been hit hard by the spill's effect on the fishing and seafood industries. “Due to this unnatural catastrophe in our waters,” Sunseri told the panel, “P& J Oysters may forever be extinct.” Sunseri said that his

company had been forced to close down its shucking operations, adding, “We've had to lay off 11 of our 19 already. The one's that are left are very much part time.”

Sunseri told the commission his concerns over the use of chemical dispersants. He mentioned that one of the fishermen hired by his company says he can no longer fish in some areas not included in the federal fishing ban. “He is not going into those areas because he actually sees a new brown foam. He is experiencing something he's never experienced before. He's not about to draw oysters from those leases that are open. It could be the dispersants. We don't know. We don't have the scientific answers.”

Jeff Angers, president of the Center for Coastal Conservation, warned the panel, “If the entire Gulf were closed to recreational fishing from May to August,” there would be a loss of \$1.1 billion and as many as 19,000 jobs as a result. Angers told the story of a Captain Ryan Lambert, a small businessman in the area who had been guiding recreational fishing trips in the region for 29 years and operated a small tourist lodge. While business had been up 60 percent for Lambert in the first quarter of 2010, the last time Angers spoke with him, after the oil spill, he said Lambert was “a couple days from pulling the plug. He didn't have a trip on the books for the next 100 days.” Anger added his story was, “One of thousands of stories we are living every day across the gulf.”

The commission will continue its hearing Tuesday morning when it will hear from representatives of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, formerly known as the Minerals Management Service, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, two agencies which were instrumental in covering up the size and scope of the oil spill in the weeks following the Deepwater Horizon blowout. The MMS, under both Bush and Obama, has pushed for the expansion of deepwater oil drilling and rubber stamped all the decisions of the oil giants.



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