

Reports expose White House cover-up of BP spill

Tom Eley
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The Obama administration intentionally suppressed information regarding the size of the BP oil spill for months, handicapping response efforts and confusing public perception of the catastrophe, according to new reports issued by investigators working for the National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling.

The revelations demonstrate that the White House response to the worst environmental disaster in recent history was to participate in a criminal conspiracy designed to shield BP and the oil industry.

White House stonewalling began in the first days after the April 20 explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig, which killed 11 workers, when it initially denied that there was an oil spill, and it continued through August, when administration officials manipulated evidence to falsely claim that 75 percent of the oil dumped into the Gulf of Mexico was “gone.” In between, the White House effectively ran interference for BP, at every turn seeking to minimize the size of the disaster, going so far as barring a federal agency from updating an incorrect early estimate of the spill volume.

The four “working reports” submitted to the commission for review are written as a warning that public confidence in the oil industry and the federal government has been seriously damaged by the failed effort to cover up the scope of the spill.

“By initially underestimating the amount of oil flow and then, at the end of the summer, appearing to underestimate the amount of oil remaining in the gulf, the federal government created the impression that it was either not fully competent to handle the spill or not fully candid with the American people about the scope of the problem,” one of the reports concludes.

This warning is ancillary to the larger purpose of the commission, which is to give offshore and deep-sea oil

drilling a clean bill of health. Obama himself created the body in early June, selecting as chairs William K. Reilly, the former Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) chief under George H.W. Bush and current ConocoPhillips board member, and Bob Graham, a retired Democratic senator from Florida and longtime advocate of deregulation.

Among other damning facts, the reports found that two weeks into the disaster the Obama administration blocked efforts by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to release oil spill estimates much higher than the 5,000 barrels-per-day figure repeatedly attributed to the agency.

NOAA did not release the report until July. It was later established that about 60,000 barrels per day were gushing out one mile beneath the ocean’s surface. In all, about 5 million barrels of oil—over 200 million gallons—were released into the Gulf before the well was finally plugged on July 15. The figure is about 20 times the size of the Exxon Valdez tanker spill of 1989.

The report also reveals that there was never any evidence backing up the 5,000 barrels-per-day estimate. It was lifted, without scrutiny, from an informal e-mail of a NOAA scientist in the first days after the explosion. The scientist was criticizing BP’s claim that no more than 1,000 barrels per day were being released.

Investigators found that independent scientists, though they were denied access to most information, produced far more accurate estimates than the Obama administration. In early May, the organization SkyTruth began to publicly criticize the government estimates based on satellite imagery of the spill. Later, in mid-June, three scientists, separately analyzing a short video clip BP had finally released to the public, issued estimates that assessed fairly accurately the

spill's daily volume. These estimates were initially dismissed by both BP and the White House. Oceanographers and biologists such as Samantha Joye at the University of Georgia have persistently criticized White House manipulation of data to obscure the quantity of oil that remains in the Gulf.

Were it not for the efforts of these scientists there is no reason to believe that the Obama administration ever would have abandoned its bogus estimate of 5,000 barrels per day.

Yet the cover-up continues. The \$20 billion or so earmarked by BP to restore damage to the economy, environment and human health—most of which it will write off in taxes—is a pittance designed to conceal the true scope of the damage. And the task of Independent Claims Facility head Kenneth Feinberg has been from the first to protect the financial interests of BP and, whenever possible, bar damage rewards to the people of the Gulf as “illegitimate.”

What is the purpose of this relentless cover-up? It is enough to note that deep-sea and offshore oil drilling continue as before; that in spite of overwhelming evidence of its criminal negligence before and after the explosion on the Deepwater Horizon, BP carries on as one of the world's richest corporations; and that not a single executive or regulator has been arrested or even fired for a disaster that killed 11 men, ruined many more lives and poisoned the Gulf of Mexico.

None of this is accidental. As the recently adopted program of the Socialist Equality Party, *The Breakdown of Capitalism and the Fight for Socialism in the United States* explains:

“The basic source of not only the catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico, but of the innumerable forms taken by the expanding economic crisis, lies in the ruthless subordination of the economic and social interests of the masses of working people to the pursuit of profit and personal wealth by capitalist corporations that own and control the means of production.”

This subordination of the needs of the people to BP was the operative principle of the entire response, and it continues today.

The restoration of the Gulf requires a program employing tens of thousands overseen by independent scientists and public health experts. The resources for such an effort can be made available through the

expropriation of BP and the for-profit oil industry that created the disaster.

This, and the prevention of similar disasters in the future, can be realized only by breaking the stranglehold of the corporate and financial aristocracy over the economy and government.

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The author also recommends:

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[16 June 2010]



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