

Marine biologist denounces BP commission findings

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The findings of the White House commission into the BP oil spill are a cover-up of oil giant BP's culpability in the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, according to Rick Steiner, a biologist specializing in oil spills.

The commission's findings declare, "To date, we have not seen a single instance where a human being made a conscious decision to favor dollars over safety."

"This is the most colossally ignorant conclusion anyone could draw," said Steiner, a retired professor at the University of Anchorage, Alaska. Steiner was closely involved in the early investigation and reporting of the BP disaster.

"This claim destroyed any credibility the commission may have had. One might question whether [lead counsel of the Commission Fred] Bartlit has a good BP job awaiting him when he is done," Steiner said in a telephone interview on Tuesday.

"The people and companies that run these rigs wake up in the morning thinking of ways to cut costs, to enhance production and to generate more revenue in less time. Every single decision they make has to do with that," he said. "The Deepwater Horizon rig was 43 days behind schedule, at about a million dollars a day. Don't tell me that this was not a persistent pressure on everybody on the rig."

Steiner said that the commission's findings were intended equally to shield BP from damages and to maintain the political credibility of the White House. "The Obama administration and BP have been joined at the hip from the day the spill started. They have identical objectives; to trivialize and minimize the damage, both political and financial," he said.

"BP has had an unwritten rule here in Alaska called 'run-to-failure.' If your equipment is starting to fail, you continue to run it till it does fail, instead of stopping the operation, upgrading it, maintaining it, putting in a new gas compressor pump or piping section. There's a stigma

associated with safety consciousness, and there's certainly a stigma associated with stopping work if you detect a safety lapse or problem."

Steiner said that the Deepwater Horizon's drilling project at the Macondo well was troubled by difficulties from the start. "The first thing that happened was that they got their drill bit stuck at about 11,000 feet, and then the tool they sent down to find it got stuck. At this point they backed out, and had to drill a side-track hole, so by the time the whole thing got back on track, they were about 43 days behind schedule."

In three months drilling the well, the Deepwater Horizon had four "well control events," with fluid and gas coming up the side of the well. "The guys on the rig kept calling it 'the well from hell', the 'nightmare well,' saying 'this well didn't want to be drilled,'" Steiner said. "What they should have done was plug it and abandon it."

In 2005, Exxon started drilling an oilfield in the Gulf of Mexico called Blackbeard, but later sealed and abandoned it because of difficulties like the ones experienced by the Deepwater Horizon. "Exxon's engineers saw these huge problems; they said, 'this doesn't look good, even though there is a lot of oil and gas down there, we don't want it,' and they backed away, they gave it up. That's exactly what BP should have done on the Macondo site. But they didn't because of potential revenues."

Aside from the broader decision to keep drilling despite safety concerns, Steiner listed over a dozen individual cases where BP cut corners to turn a profit.

At least two systems were known beforehand to have failed on the rig's blowout preventer (BOP), which is designed to seal the well in the event of a blowout. First, the hydraulic system was found to have been faulty. Then the Annular seal, one of the components of the BOP, fractured and pieces of it started coming up the drill pipe.

"They knew that there was a problem, and one of the drillers on the floor said, 'Look, we've got these chunks

of rubber coming up in the mud, shouldn't we do something about this?" And BP said, "No, don't worry," and they just kept going."

BP used far fewer centralizers—devices that keep the pipe centered—than standards called for. "Industry specifications said they should use 21 centralizers, but they only used 6. They had another 15 ready to ship out there; they may have even flown them out to the rig. BP just sent them back."

In another case of negligence, BP failed to do a final check, known as a cement bond log, on the well's cement casing, even though the crew that was supposed to do the procedure had been flown onto the rig to conduct the test. The testing crew left less than 12 hours before the blowout occurred.

The list goes on: There was evidence of drilling fluid coming up the drill pipe earlier in the day; the alarm system on the rig had been bypassed; and BP purposefully sought a riskier option for encasing the drill pipe in order to save \$10 million.

"To say, after all this, that there were no cases where corners were cut to save costs is just absurd," Steiner concluded. "If the commission is asserting that BP did not knowingly cut corners on safety, then the only alternative is that BP officials are incompetent buffoons that should never be allowed to conduct such risky energy projects in the first place. So, take your pick—either they knew they were creating a dangerous situation on Macondo, or they were clueless. If it is truly the latter, clearly they should never be allowed to drill another offshore well."

Steiner said that the environmental impact of the spill was only beginning to be felt. "There is still environmental damage from the IXTOC I spill, and that was 30 years ago. There is still damage from Exxon Valdez, 21 years later. There will be damage from the Deepwater Horizon for decades into the future; that much is clear. Some of the injury will not even be understood for years to come."

In August, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) published a report showing that much of the oil had been dispersed or dissolved. "The media, particularly the *New York Times*, had misinterpreted this report to mean that the oil is gone," said Steiner.

While much of the oil has in fact been broken up into smaller droplets, Steiner said that it still poses a danger to marine life. "The dissolved component of oil and the dispersed component of oil are still in the ecosystem, still causing damage. But people that read the headlines didn't

get that. They thought that dispersed and dissolved meant that it had gone away, when it really didn't."

"This has all fit into the modality of minimizing the damage from this disaster, because every bit of the truth reflects poorly on the administration and on BP. A lot of the data in the NOAA report was simply wrong, and they didn't disclose their methodology. If I was grading this as a high school science paper, it would be an 'F'."

"The only part of the report I agree with is that only three percent of the oil was mechanically recovered, which is pretty low. Everything else is suspect. But the report did what the government and BP wanted: It turned the media off and got it talking about other things."

The White House lifted its moratorium on new offshore drilling last month, ahead of schedule, ostensibly because it had introduced new rules for drilling. However, these regulations were struck down by a federal court, leaving no new laws on the books with regard to offshore drilling. "We're no safer now than we were before the spill. That's a travesty," said Steiner.

"Looking back at this whole thing," Steiner concluded, "we knew on day one that the damage from this blowout was sufficient to require every effort we could possibly make to prevent this sort of thing in the future. But everything is going to continue as before. That is the greatest disaster here; that the lives of 11 men may have been lost in vain, and the environment of the Gulf of Mexico sacrificed, for nothing."



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