

Commission report whitewashes BP's role in oil spill

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The presidential commission on the Deepwater Horizon oil spill released its final report and recommendations on Wednesday, a key step in the Obama administration's program to continue unregulated offshore drilling after the greatest man-made ecological disaster in US history.

The primary aim of the 382-page document is to shield the executives of BP for their criminal culpability in the disaster. The report explicitly fails to name official BP policy as the root cause of the spill, rather blaming the "culture" of the oil industry. The report concludes that, since, "complex systems almost always fail in complex ways," searching for culprits "provides a dangerously incomplete picture of what happened."

The other goal of the report is to justify the continuation of offshore drilling with no serious changes. While listing a number of recommendations that have no meaning unless they are implemented by Congress, the report insists the US "cannot realistically walk away from these offshore oil resources in the near future."

The Obama Administration put a moratorium on new offshore drilling in May, several weeks after the April 20 blowout that killed 11 workers aboard the Deepwater Horizon rig and began the worst oil spill in history. The ban, which affected only 33 out of hundreds of rigs operating in the Gulf, was lifted on October 12, seven weeks in advance of its scheduled end date of November 30.

The National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling, created by

Obama on May 21, 2010, about a month after the start of the spill, has been presented as the definitive review body for the Deepwater Horizon incident. But it has not been given subpoena power, and there is virtually no prospect that its non-binding recommendations will be implemented by Congress.

The commission is co-chaired by former Democratic Senator and Florida Governor Bob Graham, a long-time advocate of deregulation, and William Reilly, who led the Environmental Protection Agency under the Reagan administration, during the period leading up to the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill. Reilly has spent the past 17 years on the board of energy giant ConocoPhillips.

Press coverage of the report has focused on its recommendations to create an "Offshore Safety Authority" to oversee drilling, and to raise the absurdly low \$75 million liability cap on oil spills. The Offshore Safety Authority would be a subsidiary of the Minerals Management Service, the regulatory agency within the Department of the Interior that not only failed to regulate the Deepwater Horizon, but ran interference for BP to protect it from environmental and safety requirements.

The report insists that what is required is further industry self-regulation, concluding that "regulatory oversight alone will not be sufficient to ensure adequate safety," and that "the oil and gas industry will need to take its own, unilateral steps to increase dramatically safety throughout the industry, including self-policing mechanisms."

This conclusion comes even though all the evidence

gathered in the report proves that the disaster was the outcome of decades of deregulation animated by the free market conception that companies can and should “regulate themselves.” The report notes that between 1990 and 2009, the number of oil rig inspections fell by one sixth, and that the proportion of those inspections which were unannounced fell from almost half to nearly none. The Deepwater Horizon disaster is, after the financial crisis, the greatest indictment of corporate self-regulation in history.

Among the more damning facts gathered in the report is its revelation that the US has an offshore oil industry fatality rate five times higher than any other country, pointing to the disastrous consequences of self-regulation by the oil companies. “Since 2001, the Gulf of Mexico workforce, 35,000 people, working on 90 big drilling rigs and 3,500 production platforms, had suffered 1,550 injuries, 60 deaths, and 948 fires and explosions,” the report notes.

The report is at times self-contradictory. It notes, for instance, a survey conducted by Transocean, the rig’s owner, that found that 46 percent of its crew members “feared reprisals for reporting unsafe situations.” Yet the report also claims to be unable to explain why workers failed to officially report safety issues they observed on the day before the disaster.

Some facts, like known failures of the rig’s blowout preventer, are simply kept out of the story, while others are buried. For instance, the report notes that the well was called “the well from hell” by rig workers, but adds that “Macondo was not the first well to earn that nickname; like many deepwater wells, it had proved complicated and challenging.”

From its inception, the spill commission’s purpose has been to shield BP and the oil industry as a whole while defusing popular anger.

A proper investigation of the Deepwater Horizon blowout must be carried out by a politically independent body of scientists, engineers, and oil industry workers, both to investigate the role of the corporations and federal regulators in the disaster, and to make recommendations for the restoration of the

economy and environment of the Gulf Coast. Hundreds of billions can be made available for such a plan through the nationalization of BP and the oil industry as a whole.



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