# Deadly oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico

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An explosion on board an oil rig owned by Black Elk Energy in the Gulf of Mexico has killed at least one worker, with another missing, presumed dead. The Coast Guard halted their 32-hour search on Saturday night. This accident occurred less than 24 hours after BP settled for $4.5 billion on all criminal charges related to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

Eleven other workers were injured in the explosion, four with serious burns, who are being treated at Baton Rouge General Medical Center's burn unit. Two workers remain in critical condition and two remain in serious condition as of Sunday afternoon. The names of the workers have not been released.

The cause of the explosion is currently disputed. Reports that the accident was caused by the use of a cutting torch on a pipeline that still contained oil and natural gas vapors have been declared as "completely inaccurate" by Mark Pregeant, CEO of Grand Isle Shipyard, the contractor that employed 14 of the 22 workers on the rig. This came after a statement by Black Elk CEO John Hoffman on Friday that mentioned reports of workers using a cutting torch on piping.

Reports from the US Coast Guard indicate that a major oil spill has not occurred. The rig, named West Delta Block 32, was having a pipeline from the platform to the shore replaced, so there reportedly was no flow of oil at the time of the explosion. The oil slick that has been found near the rig has been determined to be from the 28 gallons of oil in the pipeline that was broken as well as residue from the platform itself. No critical or compromising structural damage on the rig has been reported.

Though this accident is nowhere near the scale of the Deepwater Horizon spill, which saw the deaths of 11 workers and the dumping of 4.9 million barrels of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico, it raises again the recklessness of oil companies in the pursuit of profits.

John Hoffman, a former BP executive, started Black Elk Energy in 2007 as an independent oil and gas company, which now holds interests in 854 wells on 155 platforms, according to the company's web site. According to Hoffman, the business model of the company is to buy up oil and gas wells that have seemingly run their course and then rework them to extract the remaining fuel.

The danger in this is that it is unknown whether the methods used to refurbish used oil wells maintain the standards needed to safely extract fuel in the Gulf. This seems to be reflected in the company's history of near misses and fines relating to poor safety procedures.

Last quarter, the company reported that an accident very similar to the blowout on Deepwater Horizon occurred on its High Island 443 A-2 ST well, off the coast of Texas. Tests found the pipe casing of the well "to be most likely compromised." After the report was issued, the well was ordered plugged and abandoned by the Department of the Interior.

The company has also paid fines for not following proper safety procedures on its rigs; one for $300,000 in April 2011, one for $140,000 in October 2011, and one for $307,500 from September 2012. Accident investigations were conducted in February 2011 and August 2012, although it is not clear whether those resulted in fines.

Despite these safety violations, Black Elk still has plans to drill 23 new wells in the Gulf. Don Briggs, president of the Louisiana Oil and Gas Association, attempted to downplay the significance of the spill. "This can't be compared to BP," Briggs said. "When men are on a platform and they're welding and cutting, it's a high-risk industry. We have accidents […but] it's a serious business and we already have all kinds of regulations."

This totally ignores the fact that the National Response center has had hundreds of reports of oil spills in only the past year. This is included in the 2,000 reports of accidents on oil rigs, many of which don't include oil spills. Moreover, the cumulative effect the spills can have over the entire area does impact and injure the Gulf ecosystem and in turn the livelihoods of those that depend on a healthy environment to survive.

What is more striking is a report issued by the Bucket Brigade stating that in the year after the well at Deepwater Horizon was capped, there were more than 3,700 oil industry accidents in the Gulf of Mexico.

In an area that has only approximately 3,700 drilling platforms, this translates into each oil and gas drilling platform in the Gulf of Mexico having an average of one accident a day. How many of those have the potential of deadly consequences?

As the fines against BP have revealed, they do nothing to halt the drilling in the Gulf of Mexico or elsewhere. No top-level executives have been held accountable and BP received a slap on the wrist, while it has not only continued but expanded its operations in the region.

Other companies are taking advantage of the lack of genuine enforcement of safety standards. With the blessing of the Obama administration, Shell Oil has spent $4.5 billion on prospecting the Arctic region. It was only forced to stop its preparatory drilling of the coast of Alaska when a spill containment mechanism was damaged during a testing incident. Shell is planning to resume operations in 2013.