OFFSHORE OIL & GAS DRILLING: NOT THE ANSWER

By Chad Nelsen & Angela Howe

In January of 1969, a Union Oil platform six miles off the coast of Santa Barbara suffered a blow out resulting in a spill of over 3 million gallons of crude oil that quickly spread into an 800-square-mile slick. The spill hit the coast and also the Channel Islands oiling thousands of sea birds, killing marine mammals, polluting kelp beds and awakening the American public to the environmental destruction that offshore oil drilling can cause.

In the aftermath of the Santa Barbara Spill, President Nixon visited the spill site and observed: “It is sad that it was necessary that Santa Barbara should be the example that had to bring it to the attention of the American people. What is involved is the use of our resources of the sea and of the land in a more effective way and with more concern for preserving the beauty and the natural resources that are so important to any kind of society that we want for the future. The Santa Barbara incident has frankly touched the conscience of the American people.”

It appears that we have forgotten this lesson, because today we are faced with a new wave of oil drilling threats on all coasts of the U.S., including Alaska.

Offshore Drilling: “Now Open”

For over the past quarter century, our U.S. coasts have been protected by Congress and both Republican and Democratic Presidents from harmful effects of new oil and gas activities. Recently, these protections have been gutted and our coasts have been left exposed. First, in July 2008, President George W. Bush lifted the Executive moratorium originally put into place in 1990 by his father, which prohibited any new leasing in Lower-48 offshore areas, including a small portion of the Eastern Gulf of Mexico. In a second blow to coastal protection, Congress allowed the 27-year Congressional moratorium on new drilling to expire in September 2008. The coasts are no longer protected from oil drilling. The outer-continental shelf (OCS) of the Atlantic and Pacific coasts are eligible for leasing by the Minerals Management Service (MMS).

The Harms of Offshore Drilling

Offshore oil and gas exploration and production poses a long list of potential harms to the ocean. The most dramatic and long-term ecological impacts from a large oil spill. Perhaps the most underestimated and worrisome impacts are the cumulative impacts on the marine and coastal environment from drilling-related activities. Even if large spills can be avoided, the mere process of drilling (along with transfer, storage and processing facilities in the coastal zone) harms the environment through damage to fragile coastal wetlands from production-related infrastructure and pipelines; destruction of ocean floor habitat; routine pollutant emissions, including toxic metals, oil, gas and byproducts; release of produced water containing dangerous levels of radioactive materials and carcinogens; and seismic exploration-related noise impacts on marine life.

Beyond these impacts to the coast, there are obvious atmospheric impacts of continued reliance on climate-altering fossil fuels. The climate effects will also cycle back to harm our oceans and coasts a second time through ocean acidification and sea level rise.

Since the Santa Barbara spill we have seen numerous other spills demonstrating that oil spills can and will happen. When Hurricane Katrina roared through the Gulf of Mexico, over 100 drilling platforms were destroyed causing the largest oil spill in the United States since the Exxon Valdez tragedy. This past September, over half a million gallons of crude oil was spilled onto the Texas and Louisiana coastline by Hurricane Ike.
The Myths of Offshore Drilling
The “Drill, Baby Drill” rant resulted in many MYTHS about new offshore drilling. Here are the big three:

1) Create Jobs - *FALSE*
2) Reduce our dependence on Foreign Oil - *FALSE*
3) Help Lower Gas Prices - *FALSE*

Offshore oil and gas industry proponents argue that drilling will create jobs. In truth, drilling is a competitive use of the ocean resource that will take jobs away from industries that stimulate the economy in a more dramatic and enduring manner. Our oceans can be used to provide sustainable economic development through food supply, recreation, tourism and alternative energy. Coastal tourism provides 28.3 million jobs and annually generates $30 billion in economic well-being to Americans. In the U.S., recreational and commercial fisheries combined supply another 2 million jobs. More drilling or more spills will disrupt ecosystems at every level with short- and long-term effects. An increase in drilling will usurp opportunities for green ocean energy, decrease the abundance of our oceans, and soil our beaches.

Offshore oil and gas production will not solve our dependency on foreign oil and will not alleviate national security threats. According to Congress’s own report, increased offshore production will not reduce reliance on foreign oil. Significant reduction of overall oil imports would require a drastic decline in the overall demand for oil. Congress raised vehicle fuel efficiency standards modestly in 2007, but has largely failed to shift the focus of federal energy policy toward those programs that would make major changes in fuel consumption.

Contrary to public perception, new drilling will not provide Americans with lower gasoline prices. In 2007, the Department of Energy reported that new offshore drilling would not exhibit any effect on gasoline prices for at least ten years, if ever. During President George W. Bush’s tenure as Chief Executive, the number of wells in federally leased areas increased exponentially, yet gasoline prices doubled during his time in office. Oil prices reflect global commodity market pressures and production cycles, not the small, incremental supply from new wells on or off our shores.

New Threat
During their last hours in office, the Bush Administration started a process to revise the five-year drilling plan (2010-2015) that specifies where and when new offshore areas are to be leased for oil and gas drilling. This new plan could open the entire East Coast, California, parts of the Gulf and sensitive areas of Alaska to oil drilling as close as three miles offshore.

Recently, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar called for extending the public comment period on the proposed five-year plan for OCS oil and gas development by 180 days, including four hearings around the nation. However, Salazar has not definitively acted against the plan. Additionally, President Barack Obama, whose stance on drilling is generally characterized as a sharp departure from the last administration’s position, has yet to categorically-reject offshore drilling or move toward reinstating the Executive moratorium.

The lack of nationwide protection means the threat of offshore drilling may turn into a state-by-state battle. Currently the states most susceptible to drilling in the short run are California, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and Virginia.

The lapse on the moratoria on offshore drilling marks arguably the largest reversal of environmental conservation in our lifetimes. Loss of the moratorium would expose thousands of miles of beaches, nearly 400 million acres of ocean, and billions of dollars of coastal tourism to chronic pollution from drilling and intermittent catastrophic oil spills. As beachgoers and lovers of the ocean, we need to now rededicate ourselves to the protection of our nation’s oceans, waves and beaches, and make our voices heard in a new Congress and in each of our states that we stand behind protections for our coastal waters and ask for an end to offshore drilling.

Our national and global leaders must focus on alternative energy development, not stop gap measures that ignore the environmental, political and economic consequences of our continued addiction to oil. Recently, our government’s coastal protection regulations have gone from bad to worse. As an ocean-loving constituency, we must make our voices heard to ask Congress and the President to restore the protections that our coasts have enjoyed for decades and rededicate ourselves to a future of alternative energy development and protection for our ocean environment.

It will be critical to take action on this disastrous new five-year leasing plan. Stay tuned.

For up-to-date information on offshore drilling news and to see how you can get involved visit: www.nottheanswer.org

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