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## Real Risks to Virginia Coast

The Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico four years ago killed 11 workers; decimated populations of birds, mammals, fish, turtles and other species; idled the fishing and tourism industry; fouled hundreds of miles of coastline, including beach and wetlands; suffocated fragile coral reefs; and caused long-term damage to the populations of dolphin (lung disease and low birth-rates), sea turtle (hugely increased strandings), and organisms at all rungs of the Gulf's food chain.

The April 2010 blowout at BP's Macondo well gushed for 87 days, a total of 4.9 million barrels of oil, coating beaches from Louisiana to Florida. About 40 percent of the Gulf was closed to fishing.

Petroleum industry advocates desperately hope people will forget such things.

Virginia leaders, including Gov. Terry McAuliffe and his predecessors - including Sens. Mark Warner and Tim Kaine - have been pushing hard to open territory off Virginia Beach to drilling for oil and gas. Joined by a chorus that includes U.S. Reps. Scott Rigell, Randy Forbes and Rob Wittman, they claim offshore drilling will create jobs while imposing minimal risk to Navy operations, tourism and fisheries.

Evidence argues the risk is real.

Scientists this week published the results of an experiment showing the Macondo spill created conditions ripe for devastating heart defects in critical commercial fish species, including bluefin tuna.

Predictably, BP immediately dismissed the study, which came days after U.S. officials lifted a ban on the company's operations in the Gulf, and after it submitted successful bids for 24 new deepwater leases.

All of that comes 25 years after the Exxon Valdez spilled 257,000 barrels of crude into Prince William Sound in Alaska. Until Macondo, it was the largest spill in modern American history.

The Valdez spill fouled 11,000 square miles of maritime Alaska, according to a multi-part report on the anniversary by National Public Radio (<http://n.pr/1msEEYX>). It destroyed local fisheries, killed countless birds and animals.

"Businesses went bankrupt. Drug and alcohol abuse went up, along with reports of domestic violence and depression. The mayor committed suicide."

More than 15 years later, the Supreme Court gutted a multi-billion dollar verdict against the company for the damages it caused in the spill. After more than two decades, the \$4.3 billion Exxon has spent on the cleanup doesn't look like nearly enough to bring back Prince William Sound.

An orca pod that once called the sound home is nearly extinct. Herring still haven't returned. Oil lingers just a few inches below the surface of the soil - evidence that even \$4.3 billion worth of clean up wasn't enough.

In the Gulf of Mexico, BP has been fighting to reduce the amount it will pay to businesses and people affected by its spill. Yet Virginia lawmakers invite that company and others to bring the same business to the waters off the commonwealth.