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# Editorial: Don't trust reductions to drilling safety

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(Photo: Andy Marlette/amarlette@pnj.com)

In late June of 2010 — 65 days after the BP's Deepwater Horizon oil spill began gushing into the Gulf of Mexico — Pensacola's world-famous white sand beaches were slathered black with oil.

A grotesque mixture of dense, sticky tarballs and floating sheets of oil that government officials referred to as "mousse" washed ashore at the height of tourist season.

The mess was immense and hopeless. BP teamed with federal, state and local officials to deploy emergency cleanup teams — haphazardly-trained workers with the Sisyphean mission of raking, shoveling and scouring miles of black-slimed coastline. It was hundreds of workers versus trillions of grains of oil-stained sand. Simply put, the sheer scale was impossible.

The hopeless day slipped into night and by morning, our beaches were white again. Miraculous. Reporters and photographers stood in the sunrise at a loss. The scene defied logic. There was no explanation.

Until government officials and BP spokesmen offered one: We did it! Clean-up accomplished. The raking and shoveling and scouring worked. Your beach is saved.

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That was when a young Pensacola News Journal reporter dug a few inches below the sugar-white surface. There it was — the oil. Masses of it. The disaster was still there, of course it was. The overnight tides had just powdered the sludge with a facade of fresh sand.

And just like that, the official, government-coordinated response shifted from braggadocious celebration back to emergency apologetic cleanup mode. The message was too clear — state, local and federal officials were willing to lie to citizens' faces, even as the hard truth sat just inches below the sand.  
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And now, almost a decade later, that brief window of Pensacola's oil spill the morning after the spill stands as a symbolic moment for citizens everywhere when it comes to offshore drilling and oversight of the industry — our government simply cannot be trusted.

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That's why new plans to reduce safety regulations for offshore drilling are bad news for Floridians on the Gulf Coast.

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Under the new plans, 25 percent for third-party inspectors of offshore drilling safety equipment will be replaced with testing by the equipment operators. Officials from the Trump administration and the drilling industry say it “reduces unnecessary burdens.”

However, moves to remove requirements for independent safety and equipment inspections — some that were put in place following the 2010 spill — recreates the precise industrial environment that led to the largest environmental disaster in U.S. history.

This isn't history repeating itself. This is humanity repeating some of our own worst mistakes.

The regulations have been branded as “Obama-era” measures, which is cheap, political target practice for policies that benefit some in the private industry while reducing safety for millions of average citizens who live along the Gulf of Mexico. It is a clear case of sacrificing the long-term safety and wellness of many in order to benefit the short-term finances of the few.

Meanwhile, the offshore drilling industry is rapidly dying from inevitable economic forces. Propelled by the sweep of science, renewable energy is speeding to the economic tipping point of being cheaper, faster and stronger. At some point very soon, there will be no going back.

So not only are government officials removing safety measures from companies with a proven risk of disaster, they are doing it to prop up an industry that will be obsolete one day.

In November, Florida voters will be asked to consider Amendment 9, a dual-pronged measure which “prohibits oil and gas drilling beneath waters controlled by Florida” while also prohibiting vaping at indoor workplaces. It's an awkward coupling that almost seems like a sad statement on our state's opposition to offshore drilling — that it stands on the same level of intellectual importance as... vaping?

The measure would require 60 percent to pass, and it would enshrine a state-water drilling ban into the state constitution.

As significant as that may be for Florida, environmental disasters don't recognize state lines. As we learned too well in 2010, a lack of oversight and safety in Louisiana waters can slaughter wildlife in Florida and kill economies in Alabama. That's why state policies simply aren't enough.

Northwest Florida is profoundly, spiritually linked to the Gulf of Mexico. It's destructive displays of storm season force are stark reminders of that. And it's cooling waters and nourishing seafood are gifts directly from God.

We are obligated to be reverent to the Gulf's powerful presence in our lives. And we are fools if we do not.

Trusting our government to reduce drilling safety regulations is simply foolish. Like the morning after oil stained Pensacola shores in 2010, we have seen the hopeless environmental destruction that comes from a lack of true stewardship. And we've seen how government officials are willing to lie to our faces about it. Even when the proof — and the poison — is right below our feet.

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