



FACT SHEET

Hindsight 2020:

LESSONS WE CANNOT IGNORE FROM THE BP DISASTER

On April 20, 2010, the BP exploratory rig *Deepwater Horizon* exploded, killing 11 workers and setting off the largest oil spill in U.S. history. Oil gushed from the seafloor for 87 days, ultimately spewing more than 200 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.

Oil washed up on 1,300 miles of shoreline, from Texas to Florida, oiling beaches and wetlands — and killing tens of thousands of birds, sea turtles, dolphins and fish. Despite removal efforts, as much as 60 million gallons of oil remained in the environment.

Gulf Coast tourism dropped, driving lost revenues, devastating local businesses and forcing worker layoffs. Oiled beaches depressed real estate values. Fisheries closed and demand for Gulf seafood plummeted. The seafood industry lost nearly \$1 billion, and the recreation industry, as a whole, lost more than a half-billion dollars.

Ten years later, we look back at the causes and impacts of the catastrophe, how those are still being felt today and the government's response. President Trump proposed expanding dirty and dangerous offshore drilling to nearly all U.S. waters. The *Deepwater Horizon* disaster highlights how offshore drilling puts our environment and economy at risk, including millions of jobs and billions of dollars in GDP — lessons we cannot afford to ignore.

Threat of Another Disaster

Decades of poor safety culture and inadequate government oversight laid the conditions for the country's worst oil spill to date. BP was unable to stop the flow of oil for months and succeeded only after multiple failed attempts to contain the disaster.

Ten years later, the industry's safety culture has not improved, and government oversight remains deficient. If anything, another disaster is more likely because the industry is drilling deeper and farther offshore, which increases the likelihood of spills and makes responding to them more difficult.

Instead of curtailing offshore oil and gas drilling and beginning the much-needed transition to clean energy, President Trump proposed to open nearly all U.S. waters to offshore drilling — while also dismantling the few protections that were put in place as a result of the disaster.

President Trump's drilling plan directly threatens coastal economies that depend on clean beaches and healthy oceans. Fishing, tourism and recreation support more than 2.6 million jobs and generate nearly \$180 billion in GDP in U.S. East and West Coast states.

The dangers of offshore oil drilling are not limited to huge disasters like the BP *Deepwater Horizon*. The infrastructure footprint of the oil and gas industry in the Gulf of Mexico is massive. As of 2016, there were 2,165 offshore platforms and more than 26,000 miles of pipeline in the Gulf — more than enough to circle the Earth.

Recommendations



President Trump should halt all efforts to expand offshore drilling to new areas.



President Trump should direct the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement to reverse efforts to weaken safety regulations.

President Trump should direct the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management to deny all pending geological and geophysical seismic permits for oil and gas in the Atlantic Ocean.



Congress should enact a moratorium on expanded offshore drilling.

Congress should incentivize investments in clean, renewable energy.



There Never Was A Plan

BP's response to the disaster was slow, inadequate and incomplete. BP submitted a spill-response plan that was wholly insufficient for the scale of the eventual disaster. The plan contained embarrassing mistakes, including a reference to seals and walrus — animals not found in the Gulf of Mexico — indicating that at least portions of the plan had been copied and pasted from Arctic drilling plans. The only plan to stop an oil spill at its source was an additional dangerous drilling process that takes months to complete, acknowledging in advance that an actual spill could take months to contain.

Key Findings

- The BP *Deepwater Horizon* disaster had catastrophic impacts on Gulf ecosystems and economies, and many impacts are still felt today.
- Offshore oil drilling remains dirty and dangerous 10 years after the BP *Deepwater Horizon* disaster. It is not a matter of whether another spill will occur, but when.
- We may never know the full extent of just how much damage the disaster caused.
- BP's response to the catastrophe was slow, inadequate and incomplete. Following a national commission's review of the disaster, far too few recommendations were implemented.
- Government regulators and the offshore oil and gas industry remain poorly suited to prevent and deal with a similar scenario today.
- Housing markets across the Gulf Coast region experienced a decline in prices between 4% and 8% that persisted for at least five years.

- The BP disaster directly reduced popular recreational activities — including boating, fishing and beach visits — between May 2010 and November 2011. This translated to a loss in the recreation industry of more than \$500 million.
- Fisheries closed and demand for Gulf seafood plummeted. A government study estimated the loss in the seafood industry at nearly \$1 billion.

What We Know a Decade Later

Today, many animals and Gulf Coast communities have not recovered. Scientists who study the spill describe large swaths of the ocean floor around the wellhead as a toxic waste dump, devoid of the kinds of life that typically inhabit that ecosystem.

Certain fish, shrimp and squid populations in the Gulf decreased by as much as 85%. More than 1 million migratory shorebirds, including 28 different species, were potentially exposed to oil. Important marshes that protect the coast from storm surges and erosion were lost, and they may never recover.

Deepwater Horizon's Deadly Impacts:



150+
dead dolphins
and whales



up to
170,000
dead sea turtles



8.3 M
oysters killed



up to
800,000
birds killed



TRILLIONS of larval fish and invertebrates killed

Some ocean wildlife were particularly hard hit by the oil's deadly impact:

- For five years after the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster, more than 75% of all dolphin pregnancies failed in the oiled area. Oil exposure can cause anemia, tooth loss, liver damage, reproductive failure and death in dolphins.
- The Gulf of Mexico Bryde's whale population decreased by about 22% following the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster. These are among the most endangered whales in the world, and oil industry activities remain a primary threat to their precarious survival.
- As many as 800,000 birds died as a result of the spill. Up to 32% of laughing gulls in the northern Gulf of Mexico died after the disaster, along with up to 12% of the area's brown pelicans.
- Up to 170,000 sea turtles were killed by the spill. More than 600 sea turtles were found dead during the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster response — about 75% of those were endangered Kemp's ridley turtles.

Oil Removal Efforts Harmed People and the Environment

Methods for removing oil have remained largely unchanged since the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster. Outdated techniques include deploying floating barriers called booms to prevent oil from spreading along the ocean surface, skimming to remove oil from the surface, burning the oil and using chemical dispersants to break oil into smaller droplets.

A new study revealed that hundreds of thousands of gallons of dispersants released underwater were apparently less effective than previously thought. Researchers believe the blowout depth and high pressure caused the oil and gas mixture released from the wellhead to disperse on its own, meaning no further dispersal was possible. This suggests that dispersant chemicals at the wellhead may have been dumped into the Gulf for no benefit at all.

Oil is toxic on its own and dispersants are also hazardous. More than 100,000 people were involved in BP *Deepwater Horizon* response and cleanup efforts, and many were exposed to crude oil

Spills can happen during each phase of the process:



Exploration



Production



Transportation



Refining

Between 2007 and 2018:



7,000+ oil spills in federal waters, an average of about two every day



115 fires and explosions in federal waters on average every year



3,000+ injuries and 48 fatalities in total

or chemical dispersants. Workers reported a range of health problems, including tightness of the chest and burning in the nose, eyes and lungs that in some cases continued for years after exposure. Some workers experienced worsening health problems years later, including blood disorders and heart problems.

Coastal Communities Suffered

A 2010 Gallup survey of nearly 2,600 Gulf Coast residents revealed a 25% increase in the medical diagnosis of depression since the rig explosion. Gulf residents who were directly exposed to oil were on average twice as likely to report new physical or mental health issues as those who were not.

As of July 2010, BP had disposed of nearly 40,000 tons of waste from the spill at nine landfills in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana and Mississippi. More than half of those were located in communities where most residents were people of color, even though people of color made up only about 26% of the populations in coastal counties at the time.

Vietnamese Americans accounted for one-third of all commercial seafood workers in the Gulf Coast area at the time of the spill. In the southeastern United States, at least 80% of people in Asian communities relied on the seafood industry for their livelihood. A survey of Vietnamese-speaking people after the spill showed people struggling with loss of income, loss of employment and inability to pay bills.

Economic Impacts:



Fishing: Nearly \$1 billion decrease in total sales — from fishermen, dealers, processors, distributors, restaurants and markets



Tourism: More than 10 million user-days of beach, fishing and boating activity lost



Recreation: Loss of more than \$500 million in popular recreational activities, including boating, fishing and beach visits



Real Estate: 4% to 8% reduction in house prices across the region that lasted for at least five years

For Oceana's full report and references, please visit:
[Oceana.org/hindsight2020](https://oceana.org/hindsight2020)

Photo Credit: Kari Goodnough/ Getty Images



Oceana is the largest international advocacy organization dedicated solely to ocean conservation. Oceana is rebuilding abundant and biodiverse oceans by winning science-based policies in countries that control one-third of the world's wild fish catch. With more than 225 victories that stop overfishing, habitat destruction, pollution and the killing of threatened species like turtles and sharks, Oceana's campaigns are delivering results. A restored ocean means that 1 billion people can enjoy a healthy seafood meal, every day, forever. Together, we can save the oceans and help feed the world. Visit usa.oceana.org to learn more.