

# Time for Action

## Six Years After Deepwater Horizon



Julie Dernansky

### **T**he Deepwater Horizon oil spill devastated the Gulf of Mexico's marine life, communities and economy.

Since the 2010 disaster, federal agencies have done little to improve the safety of offshore drilling using existing authorities and Congress has done virtually nothing to reduce the risk of another spill in our waters or on our beaches. Although investigations of the disaster resulted in detailed recommendations to strengthen the laws governing offshore drilling, no new laws have been passed.

To make better decisions about offshore energy, we must continue to learn from the ongoing impacts of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill six years after the disaster. This report highlights scientific studies, focusing on those released in 2015 and 2016, that show the damage the 2010 oil spill caused in the Gulf of Mexico. Scientists are still working to understand the scale of devastation to wildlife, fisheries and human health. These catastrophic outcomes could happen in

any region of the United States where oil and gas activities are proceeding, especially as those activities are moving into deeper and more dangerous areas.

### **Key findings include the disaster's impact on the marine ecosystem:**

- Mortality rates for common bottlenose dolphins living in Barataria Bay, Louisiana were 8 percent higher and their reproductive success was 63 percent lower compared to other dolphin populations.<sup>1</sup>
- An estimated 600,000 to 800,000 birds died as a result of the spill.<sup>2</sup>
- Harmful oil and/or oil dispersant chemicals were found in about 80 percent of pelican eggs that were laid in Minnesota, more than 1,000 miles from the Gulf, where most of these birds spend winters.<sup>3</sup>
- Oil exposure caused heart failure in juvenile bluefin and yellowfin tunas,<sup>4</sup> reduced swimming ability in juvenile mahi-mahi fish<sup>5</sup> and caused gill tissue damage in killifish.<sup>6</sup>
- The oil plume caused bleaching and tissue loss in deep-water coral reefs over an area three times larger than Manhattan.<sup>7</sup>

- Endangered sea turtles that had migrated to the Gulf from Mexico, South America and West Africa died in the spill, demonstrating the global scale of impacts.<sup>8</sup>

### **The oil spill also had a dramatic effect on human health:**

- The 50,000 people involved in spill cleanup were exposed to chemicals that severely damage lung tissue.<sup>9</sup>
- Cleanup workers and their spouses reported increased depression and domestic disputes.<sup>10</sup>
- Even Gulf residents indirectly affected by the spill suffered from increased anxiety and depression.<sup>11</sup>
- It can take a decade or more for oil spill victims to recover from the physical and psychological effects of an oil disaster.<sup>12</sup>

### **The economic losses from the spill were enormous:**

- The impact of the oil spill on fisheries could total \$8.7 billion by 2020, including the loss of 22,000 jobs.<sup>13</sup>
- 10 million user-days of beach, fishing and boating activity were lost.<sup>14</sup>



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Surface oil in the Gulf of Mexico following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. May, 2010.





Oiled marsh in Barataria Bay, Louisiana following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. September, 2010.

#### Recommendations:

- President Obama should not allow additional leasing, exploration or development in frontier areas such as the Atlantic, Arctic and ultra-deepwater.
- President Obama should not allow offshore drilling in new areas or areas where vulnerable ecosystems will be at risk.
- The federal government should fully implement the well control rule and finalize Arctic-specific regulations.
- President Obama should not allow seismic airgun blasting, a technique used to locate oil and gas deposits, where marine life can be harmed.
- The United States should transition away from offshore oil drilling and instead invest in cleaner, safer technologies like offshore wind and other renewable energy sources.
- Scientists, decision makers, federal and state governments, and the public should continue to monitor and learn from the effects of the Deepwater Horizon spill so that we can restore losses and prevent future disasters.

Six years later, the lesson from the Gulf of Mexico oil spill is clear: Offshore drilling is not safe for the environment, the economy or human health. We therefore should not expand oil and gas activities in U.S. waters. Instead, we should rapidly develop clean energy options, including offshore wind power.

To read the full report, please visit [Oceana.org/TimeForAction](http://Oceana.org/TimeForAction).



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