

The 2010 BP / Deepwater Horizon Disaster: Will History Repeat Itself?

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Statement of panelist John Amos, President of SkyTruth

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SkyTruth is a conservation technology nonprofit that uses satellite images and data to measure and illustrate environmental issues.

First let me say I'm glad you're able to join us today. COVID is very much on our minds, and we hope you and your friends and families are doing as well as possible under these difficult circumstances.

This panel will explore what we think are 3 very important questions raised by the deadly BP oil spill that began 10 years ago. Here's the condensed version:

Has the Gulf recovered? - NO, it has not. The Gulf is still significantly impacted, physically and biologically.

Can a major oil spill like this happen again? - YES, for numerous reasons our panelists will discuss.

Are we ready to respond better to the next major spill? - NO, we are not. We'll talk about a combination of policy, technical, and cultural reasons that make it likely our *next* oil spill response will underperform just as badly as the *last* one.

Finally, our panel will offer recommendations to help reduce the future risk of a major oil spill from offshore drilling, and improve our ability to respond.

So why am I here?

I'm a geologist who used satellite images to explore for oil and gas, for companies like Shell, Exxon and BP, for 10 years. During that time I met Dr. MacDonald, when I was part of a NASA- and industry-funded team working to detect oil slicks at sea using radar satellite images.

In 2001 I left industry and started SkyTruth to apply satellite technology to the environment. And over the years I've seen again and again that the oil industry, with government cooperation if not outright collusion, systematically downplays the pervasiveness and severity of oil pollution, resists attempts to accurately measure the problem, and obfuscates the public's right to know what's happening in public waters.

A few examples:

A few days after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in 2005, SkyTruth published satellite images showing dozens of leaks coming from platforms and pipelines, creating oil slicks covering hundreds of square miles in the Gulf. Industry and government officials jointly proclaimed "not a drop of oil had spilled" due to Katrina. Some were still publicly repeating this claim, 5 years after it was disproven in a report to Congress prepared by the Department of Homeland Security documenting at least 9 *million* gallons had been spilled.

In 2009 SkyTruth illustrated a months-long oil spill off the coast of Australia resulting from a blowout and loss of well control. While testifying to Congress that November on the risks posed by offshore drilling, I was pointedly criticized by the senator from Louisiana who claimed a disaster like that, could never happen in the US.

5 months later the Macondo well at the Deepwater Horizon platform blew out off Louisiana's coast, 11 men were killed, and the worst accidental oil spill in history was underway.

At SkyTruth we began analyzing daily satellite images from NASA and publishing our findings on social media. With Dr. MacDonald's help, we measured the size of the oil slick and its growth from day to day, and were able to make our own independent estimates of how much oil was gushing out of the failed Macondo well. Our estimate was more than 20 times greater than the rate BP and the Coast Guard were claiming. And within the first week, we concluded this had already exceeded Exxon Valdez and had become the nation's worst oil spill.

A team of scientists were ready to deploy instruments on the seafloor to directly measure the flow rate, and they were blocked from the site. What followed was a series of under-engineered attempts to stop the flow of oil, wasting weeks of precious time as millions of gallons gushed into the Gulf every day.

This culture of misinformation doesn't just emerge during catastrophes. While we were monitoring the BP spill, we discovered a chronic oil leak nearby, coming from the site of an oil platform owned by Taylor Energy. When we published images of this leak, media attention prompted the Coast Guard to disclose they had been working with Taylor to stop the leak since the platform had been destroyed by a hurricane in 2004 -- *six years* earlier.

Dr. MacDonald will tell us more about what happened to the Taylor platform, and why that's so important now.

SkyTruth's daily monitoring of the Taylor site revealed a leak rate of hundreds to thousands of gallons per day. Meanwhile Taylor claimed the leak was just a few gallons a day. It took almost another decade of dogged independent monitoring by SkyTruth, Florida State University, Tulane, and Gulf-area NGOs, plus some very persistent reporting by the media, to prompt the Coast Guard to take control of the response away from Taylor. To their credit the Coast Guard finally took aggressive action to contain the leak. And on average more than 1,000 gallons of oil are being collected from that leak every day.

Finally: chronic oil pollution from offshore production is a widespread problem that is systematically understated in the official record. Here's an animation showing the 18,000 oil spills reported to the Coast Guard since the BP spill. Most of these spills are reported to be very small. But working with Dr. MacDonald, we compared satellite images of slicks to the spill reports, and found that the average report underestimated the size of the spill by a factor of 10.

Thanks to COVID, this underreporting just became significantly worse. On March 26, the Environmental Protection Agency announced they would suspend the rules that require industry to report their leaks and spills. Since then, we've documented a 40% drop in the number of oil pollution reports in the Gulf.

So to sum it up: the oil industry and our government have demonstrated, again and again, they don't want to monitor and don't want to measure pollution, and they actively obfuscate public knowledge about what's really happening in our nation's waters.

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