

Karen Telleen-Lawton: Oil and Apples

Energy policy needs to hold all oil companies accountable

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | Published on 05.17.2010

When a friend and I were talking the other day about the [Deepwater Horizon Incident](#) (the Louisiana oil platform blowout), she told me that the buzz on the Internet is that the cause might be ecoterrorism. I was shocked.

Notwithstanding that we rely on mostly different media for our news, the inference appalled me. Not that terrorism wasn't a possibility — and certainly some independent investigative journalists will rightly take up that pursuit — but that “bad apple” discussions should usurp discussion of whether a gargantuan oil spill is the result of “bad bushel” resource extraction policies.

The possibility of “bad apple” terrorism undoubtedly is a part of oil drilling emergency planning policy. Cost/benefit analysis of whether and how to allow any natural resource extraction on public lands (and seas) needs to include the potential cleanup costs from any disaster — nature- or human-caused. Current law already requires such a fund, but it's not sufficiently large. [BP](#) most likely will get a free ride with millions of dollars of taxpayer money.



Not surprisingly, Californians are interested in learning how to prevent a four-peat ([Santa Barbara in 1969](#), [Alaska in 1989](#) and Louisiana in 2010). The perspective of the [National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration](#) is helpful. The NOAA is the leading scientific adviser for U.S. oil spills.

According to NOAA's site, more than 460 vessels are involved in containment efforts including skimming and in-situ burning operations, as weather permits. Dozens of aircraft and remotely operated vehicles are involved. More than 1.5 million feet of boom and nearly 400,000 gallons of dispersant have been deployed to contain the spill, recovering about a million gallons of oil-water mix thus far. They are also making extra satellite observations to monitor the spill for their purposes, as well as for the [U.S. Geological Survey](#) and the [Department of Homeland Security](#).

[NOAA Fisheries](#) has increased the area closed to fishing, but 93 percent of the Gulf's federal waters are still open for fishing and tourism. They are assessing the impacts on coastal communities, marine protected areas, wetlands and beaches, and are “deeply concerned about the effects of this oil to Gulf fisheries and the marine ecosystems, which are nursery grounds for shrimp, crabs, oysters and hundreds of species of fish like red snapper and redfish.”

Steve Cochran, a director for the [Environmental Defense Fund](#), is closely concerned. He who grew up on Lake Pontchartrain and spent his first post-college years working for the oil industry.

He says: “We have a saying where I grew up: If you continue to load the gun, God will provide the drunk or the fool who is going to pull the trigger. There are more than 3,000 operating wells in Gulf. I know firsthand how great the pressure is to produce at all costs, even at the expense of cutting corners on safety. Sad to say, it was only a matter of time before it caught up with us.”

Cochran suggests two solutions. 1) Requiring that the emergency response infrastructure, such as warehouses of booms and equipment, be in place to respond more quickly, and 2) make it more expensive for oil companies to cut back on safety. Hold oil companies accountable for the protections, the cleanup and the carbon pollution associated with these products.

“Making the polluter pay will do more than anything else we can do to reduce the risk of exposure to these pollutants,” Cochran asserts. “We can mandate it, we should, we can require it, and we should. But making them pay for it, making sure they know the dollars will come out of their pocket if they make a mistake, that’s the key.”

The bottom line is, it’s time for oil companies to stop spoiling the whole bushel — or barrel — of energy policy. Oil needs to pull its own weight.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton’s column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*