

Gulf oil spill: Obama should reconsider drilling and Salazar's appointment

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President Obama's choice of Ken Salazar for Interior Secretary has been controversial from the first announcement. Although Obama promised his administration would make decisions based on science, not politics, Salazar's record on listing threatened species for ESA protection is worse than the Bush administration under Secretary Dick Kempthorne.

Salazar, a former Attorney General and Senator from Colorado, is a rancher and landowner, who once threatened to sue the USFWS if black-tailed prairie dogs were listed for ESA protection, because they are considered to be pests by ranchers.

In 2006, while Salazar was in the Colorado Senate, he fought to get increased oil and gas leases in the Gulf Coast region, by sponsoring the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act of 2006.

Recently, in his capacity as Obama's Secretary of Interior, he was instrumental in shaping the president's announcement in March that called for more exploratory offshore drilling leases to be approved near Alaska and parts of the Eastern Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic coasts.

As the country reels from the worst oil spill in US history, since it will most likely surpass the Exxon Valdez disaster, the Center for Biological Diversity is calling for Obama to reconsider not only more drilling, but Salazar's appointment, due to his dismal failure to reform the Mineral Management Service.

Reforming the MMS, which had been mired in controversy amid allegations of trading sex, drugs, and financial favors

with oil execs, was supposed to be the first thing the Interior would accomplish.

Salazar made this statement shortly after Obama was sworn in as president:

"President Obama's and my goal is to restore the public's trust, to enact meaningful reform...to uphold the law, and to ensure that all of us -- career public servants and political appointees -- do our jobs with the highest level of integrity."

A short time later, the MMS, under Salazar's watch of "integrity", approved the BP plan, without environmental review, because BP said there was no possible danger of any adverse environmental issues.

According to a statement from Kieran Suckling, Executive Director for the Center for Biological Diversity, BP submitted its drilling plan to the MMS on March 10, 2009. Rather than subject the plan to a detailed environmental review before approving it as required by the National Environmental Policy Act, the agency declared the plan to be "categorically excluded" from environmental analysis because it posed virtually no chance of harming the environment. As BP itself pointed out in its April 9, 2010, letter to the Council on Environmental Quality, categorical exclusions are only to be used when a project will have "minimal or nonexistent" environmental impacts.

Here are just a few of the startling excerpts from BP's arrogant plan, any or all of which, would have been challenged if Salazar had required an environmental review:

2.7 Blowout Scenario - A scenario for a potential blowout of the well from which BP would expect to have the highest volume of liquid hydrocarbons

is not required for the operations proposed in this EP.

14.5 Alternatives - No alternatives to the proposed activities were considered to reduce environmental impacts.

14.6 Mitigation Measures - No mitigation measures other than those required by regulation and BP policy will be employed to avoid, diminish or eliminate potential impacts on environmental resources.

14.2.3.2 Wetlands - An accidental oil spill from the proposed activities could cause impacts to wetlands. However, due to the distance to shore (48 miles) and the response capabilities that would be implemented, no significant adverse impacts are expected." (p. 45)

14.2.2.1 Essential Fish Habitat - In the event of an unanticipated blowout resulting in an oil spill, it is unlikely to have an impact based on the industry wide standards for using proven equipment and technology for such responses, implementation of BP's Regional Oil Spill Response Plan which address available equipment and removal of the oil spill.

"Secretary Salazar has utterly failed to reform the Mineral Management Service," said Suckling, "Instead of protecting the public interest by conducting environmental reviews, his agency rubber stamped BP's drilling plan, just as it does hundreds of others every year in the Gulf of Mexico. The Minerals Management Service has gotten worse, not better, under Salazar's watch."

Appearing May 5, on MSNBC, Kieran said that Obama should make sure Salazar is accountable for regulatory reform of the MMS or better yet--ask for his resignation.