



Anatomy of an Oil Disaster: Heckuva Job, Kenny!

Commentary by Nikolas Kozloff

Who is responsible for the great environmental disaster arising from the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico? As the country reels from the sheer magnitude of the accident, the media has rightly pointed the finger at BP. Yet, not nearly enough attention has been paid to the role of Ken Salazar and his derelict Department of Interior, a government entity which, in theory, regulates offshore oil drilling.

With a budget of almost \$16 billion, Interior is a hugely important department overseeing more than 500 million acres of federal land including the national parks --- nearly a fifth of all land in the U.S. The department's programs range from protecting endangered species to providing oil and gas leases.

As the Huffington Post has reported, as recently as late 2009 the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) warned Interior that it was vastly underestimating the frequency of offshore oil spills and was dangerously understating the threat and impact a major spill could have on coastal people. Adding to the furor, the Washington Post reports that Interior exempted BP's Gulf of Mexico drilling operation from a detailed environmental impact analysis last year.

Could these stories merely represent the tip of the iceberg? In light of Salazar's lackluster stewardship of Interior, I think it's more than likely. Whatever the case, we shall get more insight during upcoming hearings on Capitol Hill. Next week, the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee will address the spill, adding to an already crowded calendar of oil hearings. Though witnesses have not been announced, it is expected that Salazar will testify. The secretary is already in damage control mode and recently announced that his department would establish a board to review offshore drilling safety and technology issues as well as tighten oversight of industry equipment testing.

How could the government have allowed such a catastrophe to happen? This is the type of accident that one would have expected during the Bush presidency, when Big Oil had free reign, and not during the Obama administration. Indeed, under Bush the Interior Department became such an utter mockery that one could almost say it acted as a kind of subsidiary of the oil industry itself.

According to Interior's inspector general Earl Devaney, who led a two year investigation of the department, there was "a culture of substance abuse and promiscuity" amongst staff at the department's Minerals Management Service (MMS). The entity handles billions of dollars in oil and natural gas supplies that are handed over by companies as in-kind royalty payments for drilling on federal lands.

Devaney found that about a dozen MMS workers were abusing cocaine and got drunk at social events with oil company personnel doing business with the agency. In an astonishing and blatant case of criminal conflict of interest, the MMS workers then had sex with industry contacts and accepted gifts from oil and gas industry representatives. Many MMS workers were later either disciplined or fired over the incident.

Western Cowboy Rides into Town

The ascendance of Ken Salazar at Interior was supposed to change the oily nature of politics at Interior. A westerner whose roots stretched back to the 16th century, Salazar was rarely seen without his trademark cowboy boots and hat. Obama's nomination of Salazar to head Interior cheered some groups which had fought to protect remote backcountry and pristine watersheds from oil and gas drilling. Before becoming a Democratic Senator from Colorado, Salazar served as the state's director of Department of Natural Resources. He also worked as an environmental and water attorney in private practice.

As Secretary of Interior, Salazar pledged to clean up the sleaze. During his confirmation hearings, he said he said there might be certain areas that could be off limits to offshore oil production. Overall, some groups said, Salazar had a pretty strong environmental record as Senator. To his credit, he clashed with the Bush administration over oil and gas drilling on public lands and promoted his home state of Colorado as a renewable energy leader.

Sounds all fine and good, but look beneath the surface and there was more than enough to give one pause. A politician with ties to old time western extractive industries like ranching and mining, Salazar joined with Republicans in actually threatening to sue the federal government if the black-tailed prairie dog was declared endangered.

Even more ominously, he also sided with Republicans in

proposing an energy policy which included relaxing restrictions on offshore oil drilling. Indeed, in 2006 Salazar voted yes on the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act, which ended protections for Florida's Gulf Coast and opened up 8 million acres off the coasts of Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana for oil and gas drilling.

Believing that Obama had betrayed his campaign promises to bring about change, outraged wildlife advocacy groups sent a letter to the president protesting Salazar's nomination as Secretary of the Interior. A better choice, they argued, would have been Democratic representative Raul Grijalva of Arizona who had ultra green credentials.

Writing in the New Mexico Independent, environmentalist and former oil and gas man Jim O'Donnell remarked "Mr. Salazar is not a visionary. He is not a change agent. Mr. Salazar has a very interesting and compelling story as a fellow Westerner. However, from my viewpoint, he has little interest in protecting biodiversity and even less interest in a fossil fuel-free economy. This is not the change we need."

The Waffler

"The word on Ken Salazar," opined the New York Times in January, 2009, "...is that he is friendly, approachable, a good listener, a genial compromiser and a skillful broker of deals." But, the paper added, "That is also the rap on Ken Salazar." Fundamentally, the Times argued, "What the Interior Department needs right now is someone willing to bust heads when necessary and draw the line against the powerful commercial groups — developers, ranchers, oil and gas companies, the off-road vehicle industry — that have long treated the department as a public extension of their private interests."

Over the next year and a half, Salazar did little to challenge the Times' mild depiction of his character. At issue for the new secretary was the hot button issue of offshore oil drilling. In the final days of the Bush presidency, both Congress and the White House allowed a federal ban on offshore oil drilling to expire which stood to open new areas along the U.S. coastline to exploration.

Faced with some difficult political and moral choices, Salazar delayed. The secretary declared that new offshore oil drilling would be put on hold and in the meantime the government would hold a six-month public comment period. Environmentalists were somewhat encouraged, but they noted that the move failed to stop offshore oil development per se.

In April, 2009 Salazar went personally to Alaska where fishermen pleaded with him not to go ahead with new Outer Continental Shelf oil development in Bristol Bay. Rebecca Noblin, an Anchorage-based attorney for the environmental group Center for Biological Diversity, a group that sued to list polar bears under the Endangered Species Act, told the Anchorage Press that she was disappointed Salazar didn't call upon scientists and environmentalists during the hearing.

"It's difficult to know what impressions the event may've left with Secretary Salazar," the Anchorage Press noted. "Shortly after Noblin's testimony, he gave some informal closing remarks that indicated that he'd heard the comments, but little else," the paper added. "In a subsequent briefing for reporters just before departing, he was noncommittal."

Salazar continued his travels, heading on to another hearing in New Orleans. There, he was confronted once again by concerned environmentalists who took the microphone to explain that expanding offshore oil development would do great damage to sensitive ocean ecosystems. Darryl Malek-Wiley of the Sierra Club called for a detailed analysis of oil spills, declaring that hundreds of millions of gallons of crude had leaked in recent hurricanes, in part due to aging oil and gas infrastructure.

If Salazar was moved by the environmentalists' entreaties, he made no mention. The nation needed a "comprehensive energy plan," he said, though he wouldn't specify whether such an approach ought to include more offshore oil drilling along the U.S. coastline.

The Future of Offshore Oil Exploration

Perhaps the hearings were all just a smoke screen for Salazar and a mere public façade. As we now know, Interior ignored the warnings put forth by the NOAA while Salazar quietly crafted a horrible offshore oil plan with the White House. In March of this year Obama, much to the chagrin of environmentalists, finally announced that he would conduct a major expansion of offshore oil and gas development in the Gulf of Mexico amongst other areas.

In the wake of BP's massive oil spill off Louisiana, the White House announced that it would put a hold on new offshore oil exploration. But what is really needed now is a complete and total moratorium on ALL offshore oil exploration. In light of his track record, Ken Salazar is hardly the most appropriate bureaucrat to carry out such an ambitious agenda which would necessarily entail a switch from fossil fuels to alternative energy.