



Gulf spill commission: Increase spending, research

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska —

A presidential panel on the Gulf of Mexico oil spill recommended new rules and new spending to prevent future disasters in its official report Tuesday, nine months after the Macondo well became the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history.

The conclusion of the president's panel: there is plenty of blame to go around.

“On April 20th, after a long period of rolling the dice, our luck ran out,” said the commission’s co-chair, former Florida Sen. Bob Graham. “It is important to emphasize: these errors, mistakes and management failures were not the product of a single rogue company. We believe they unveiled systemic failures within the oil and gas industry, and within the regulation by the federal government of that industry.”

The panel has prescribed 15 fixes for the failures, including increasing budgets for the federal agency that regulates offshore drilling, increasing the \$75 million liability cap for oil-spill damages, and dedicating 80 percent of the fines and penalties from the BP spill to restoring the Gulf of Mexico.

Graham warned that without dramatic changes, we could see a repeat of the Gulf disaster.

“Science has not given a sufficient seat at the table -- actually, I think that is a considerable understatement,” Graham said.

Graham said spill cleanup technology has not improved much in the last 20 years, compared to the giant leaps made in drilling technology.

With plans to begin exploration in the Arctic next summer, Shell says it’s pleased that the commission stopped short of recommending a ban on offshore drilling in the Arctic. The company says it’s already addressing a lot of the issues the commission has raised.

“I would take exception to the fact that anybody could say oil spill technology has not evolved in the last 20 years,” said Shell Alaska vice president Pete Slaiby. “Right now, we’re funding studies to better understand the impacts of dispersants in the Arctic and how that works; we’ve funded research that’s ongoing right now in Norway. We’re definitely agreed on the need to do work.”

Commission member and University of Alaska Anchorage Chancellor Fran Ulmer says legislation is the next step in the wake of the spill.

“All of these things will better position the United States to take advantage of the resources in the Arctic, but we don’t feel we should sit back and wait indefinitely for that to happen,” Ulmer said. “We are challenging Congress to put funding into both the research and the capabilities for the Coast Guard and other agencies, so we can move forward.”

The commission recommended more Coast Guard capabilities in the Arctic, as well as more science. As a member of the commission, Ulmer brought institutional memory about the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill.

“In the first few years after spill, money actually was used to do research and development; very little of that is funded currently,” Ulmer said. “I think that’s another takeaway from this.”

It will take a lot more science to convince environmental groups that it’s safe to drill in the Arctic.

“BP has gotten a lot of blame for this and other oil companies have spent a lot of money to distance themselves from this,” said the Center for Biological Diversity’s Alaska director, Rebecca Noblin. “Bottom-line, it could have happened to any oil company and it could have happened in the Arctic, and we need to be aware that these risks are out there and the oil drilling is getting riskier and riskier.”

The spill commission also called for an industry-led safety institute and an independent watchdog office within the Interior Department.

BP released a statement responding to Tuesday’s report.

“Given the emerging consensus that the Deepwater Horizon accident was the result of multiple causes involving multiple parties, we support the commission’s efforts to strengthen industry-wide safety practices,” BP said in the statement.

The commission recommended that regional advisory councils be created in the Gulf, like the one in Prince William Sound, to monitor development and spill response. The commission also wants to see one for the Arctic.

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