

THE VOICE OF RUSSIA

Environmental oversight needed for future BP activities because of the problem with the spill - biologist

Jay Johnson / 23 April 2014

Four years have passed since the massive BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. An explosion aboard the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig claimed lives of 11 workers and unleashed the worst environmental disaster in US history. Over 200 gallons of oil contaminated the ocean and coastline.

BP agreed to pay some \$8 billion in order to settle criminal misconduct claims from individuals and businesses affected by the accident. Environmentalists say thousands of animals, including birds, sea turtles, dolphins and a massive number of fish may have been afflicted by the spill and its aftermath.

According to various estimates it could take years before the full extent of the damage from the Deepwater Horizon spill could be assessed properly. In 2010, the Center for Biological Diversity filed a lawsuit against Ken Salazar, who was the US Interior Secretary at the time, for BP Oil's affect on wildlife. To discuss the damage in the Gulf of Mexico and the current



Photo: RIA Novosti

situation with off-shore drilling in the US Voice of Russia talked to Jaclyn Lopez, a staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity. She also worked on the BP oil spill litigation.

Is this litigation ongoing or has it come to an end?

In the days and months following the announcement of the initial we in total filed about 12 different law suits. Some of them are still ongoing, some of them have been resolved. And the ones that have been resolved, some of them were favorable and the other ones were not.

The earliest successful resolution was in June of 2010 and that had to do with BP's use of "burn boxes", which is a common way of disposing surfaced oil. It was discovered that in these "burn boxes" sea turtles were being set on fire. We were successful in stopping that activity and BP agreed to stop that practice that allowed observers to look at the "burn box" before it was set on fire to rescue sea turtles.

We have other pieces of litigation that were resolved against our interest. For example, a few different suits sought to have the Minerals Measurement Service engage in consultation with our Wildlife Management Agency for future activities, because one of the problem with the BP spill was the lack of environmental oversight. So, we were seeking reform of the way our agency deals with the oil industry's interests.

This was one of the worst disasters in American history. And people are still dealing with that today. How could this be possible that the courts ruled against you?

The way our Congress has set up our executive agencies, the court gives the agencies a lot of discretion in implementing the laws that they are charged with carrying out. So, part of it has to do with that. In the years following the spill President Obama convened series of commissions that were charged with investigations.

And all those commissions' reports said – what we are doing isn't enough and there needs to be a significant reform of how we continue authorizing this industry. The industry continues moving into deeper and deeper waters. These waters are untested. We still don't have a safe way of preventing another big spill. We still don't have a good way of responding to a massive spill.

So, we have all these uncertainties and the only thing we do know for sure is that we are not equipped to deal with any of it. So, I would agree with you that the courts with the authority to require the agency to go back to the drawing board and come up with better policies haven't really done so.

A few days ago, there was the four-year anniversary of the Deep Water Horizon massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Is there still damage that is occurring there or have the plants and animals actually recovered?

Louisiana is a state that is at or below the sea level in some places. And the marshes protected it from advancing sea level rise. The way these marshes can continue to be productive is if they have vegetation. And if you go out to those marshes now, it is like a desert. It looks like a fire has blazed through the area.



US Deepwater Horizon worst oil spill four years on

And what that means for the State of Louisiana is that if you don't have that vegetation, the marshes themselves begin to wash away, and they lose that protective barrier from the advancing Gulf of Mexico.

So, not only the wildlife and the ecosystem has been impacted, but the State of Louisiana itself is now becoming increasingly threatened by the sea level rise.

And in Louisiana, a lot of the people there are fishermen and depend upon going out into the Gulf, and it seems like they lost their livelihoods because of this disaster.

The shrimp industry is back in business. Other industries have been hit a little bit harder, like the oyster industry.