



As Ocean Drilling Expands, Obama Administration Turns Blind Eye to Offshore Fracking

May 13 2015

By Kristen Monsell

America's coastal communities got some disturbing news recently when Interior Secretary Sally Jewell pledged to open "vast areas" of the ocean to oil drilling.

Under the shadow of the anniversary of the deadly Deepwater Horizon disaster, the Obama administration is moving quickly to greenlight oil and gas exploration in dangerously unpredictable Arctic waters and off the Atlantic coast, where an oil spill could devastate coastal economies.

Attempting to greenwash this dangerous expansion of drilling in America's fragile ocean ecosystems, Secretary Jewell has talked up new regulations for offshore oil operations, including a rule on "blowout preventers" — the kind of valve that failed to seal the well in the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe.

But the Obama administration is utterly failing to address one of the oil industry's riskiest and most rapidly expanding practices: offshore fracking.

That's why Congresswoman Lois Capps, D-Calif., recently introduced a bill to prohibit fracking in federal waters in the Pacific Ocean

until the administration conducts a study on the impacts of offshore fracking on the marine environment and public health.

In March, after years of delay, Jewell unveiled the first-ever regulations for hydraulic fracturing on onshore public lands. The rules are weak. They do little to reduce fracking pollution's damage to America's air, water and wildlife.

But as bad as the onshore rules are, it's even more disturbing that the Interior Department is doing virtually nothing to regulate — or even track — offshore fracking.

The oil industry is already fracking near the California coast and in the Gulf of Mexico.

But in response to my organization's public records request, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management and the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement admit they haven't kept track of how many offshore frack jobs have been permitted in the Gulf of Mexico.

Offshore fracking is similar to what occurs onshore — companies blast huge amounts of water and toxic chemicals into the earth at high pressures to crack rock beneath the ocean floor.

But the unpredictable ocean environment makes offshore fracking especially dicey — and highlights the grave dangers of federal inaction.

Interior's new onshore fracking rules are packed with industry-friendly loopholes. But they do put minimal restrictions on storage of polluted fracking wastewater. In contrast, fracking in our oceans is barely regulated at all.

The federal government even allows oil companies to annually dump up to 9 billion gallons of wastewater, including fracking chemicals, into California's wildlife-rich Santa Barbara Channel. How much oil waste fluid is discharged into the Gulf of Mexico? Federal officials can't say — they seem to have no idea.

They also don't know all the chemicals used in fracking operations. But one peer-reviewed study found that up to 25 percent of fracking chemicals could cause cancer. And a review of chemicals used in offshore fracking in California found that many can kill or harm sea otters and other marine animals.

Onshore, fracking is done in 90 percent of wells on federal land, and it's increasingly common offshore. Media investigations revealed that oil companies have fracked more than 200 wells off California's coast. And, according to recent reports, the industry fracked at least 115 wells in the Gulf of Mexico in 2013 alone.

Oil companies plan to expand their use of fracking in the Gulf so they can extract oil from even deeper wells, according to recent reports.

Fracking could also spread to the Atlantic, given Interior's proposal to open waters from Delaware to Florida to oil drilling.

Meanwhile, federal officials charged with protecting us from oil industry pollution are allowing ocean fracking without notifying the public and without any meaningful review of the environmental risks.

Every offshore frack increases the threat of chemical pollution or a catastrophic oil spill in our delicate ocean environments. But instead of carefully studying such dangers, Interior is turning a blind eye, relying on outdated environmental assessments that don't address fracking risks.

The truth is that offshore fracking is far too big a gamble to take with our oceans' life-support systems. The federal government should prohibit this inherently dangerous practice.

Secretary Jewell certainly has no right to give the oil industry free reign to frack at will in our oceans — or to keep people living in seaside communities in the dark about this toxic industrial activity off our coasts.