

THE NEXT GREAT BATTLE

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CAN SURFRIDER'S CHAPTER NETWORK PROTECT THE COAST FROM NEW OFFSHORE DRILLING?



As secret meetings go, it was a rather well publicized affair. On a cool November day last year, in the back room of a state agency building, officials from North

Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia met privately with federal regulators and oil lobbyists for more than six hours. Their task: to plan for the expansion of offshore drilling in the Atlantic Ocean. Personae non gratae included both the media and the public.

Of course, as often happens with such proceedings, word of the secret meeting managed to leak out. While government officials huddled with the oil lobbyists, frustrated reporters and enraged citizens stewed outside the building. When the media (but not the public) were finally allowed in the room, statements were evasive as state and federal officials pointed fingers at each other. The resulting headlines were not kind. The Associated Press wasted little time castigating participants of the “closed-door meeting.”

But for Surfrider activists like Matt Walker of the Outer Banks, North Carolina Surfrider Chapter, any satisfaction in seeing

the public reprimand was tempered by the larger threat that had been exposed.

“The rest of the country recognized what we’d been fearing for the past two years. That Governor McCrory’s frequent promises to open North Carolina to offshore drilling were not idle threats and we needed to take serious action before it was too late,” stated Matt.

The message was clear: the government was rolling out the red carpet for the oil industry. And, concerned citizens would need to make their voices heard.

The battle lines had been drawn, but the question remained. Just five years after the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, why are our government leaders cheerleading for offshore drilling in the Atlantic?

BP GULF SPILL: FIVE YEARS LATER

Next month marks the anniversary of one of the worst environmental disasters in U.S. history. On April 20, 2010, tragedy struck the Gulf of Mexico when BP’s Deepwater Horizon rig exploded, killing 11 people and gushing oil for 87 days.

By the time the rig was finally capped, an estimated 4.9 million barrels of oil had spilled, causing unprecedented devastation to the Gulf’s marine ecosystem. The Center for Biological Diversity estimates the spill killed or harmed nearly 115,000 birds, sea turtles and marine mammals. But this was only the tip of the iceberg as oil penetrated

every facet of the environment, including the seafloor, beaches, and wetlands that serve as nurseries for sea life. Now, five years later, scientists are just beginning to understand the extent of damage to this magnificent ecosystem.

Yet, the environmental impacts are only part of the story. The spill wreaked economic havoc on the five states bordering the Gulf.

The coastal region of the Gulf is highly populated and depends on a thriving tourism industry to support its economy. Hotels and other businesses saw revenue plummet as visitors canceled plans en masse. Meanwhile, the fishing industry suffered from smaller catches and reduced demand for seafood as consumers focused on potential health risks. For hundreds of communities on the Gulf coast, the BP spill was a disaster that would reverberate for years.

Members of the Emerald Coast Surfrider Chapter in Florida were among those who experienced the impacts firsthand. Following the BP spill, local beachgoers began suffering from burning eyes,

respiratory problems and other conditions caused by oil and chemical dispersants in the water. Within weeks, the chapter launched its own water quality testing program to document the problems that government officials were either ignoring or trying to cover up.

“As devastating as the BP disaster was to our Gulf and community, it wasn’t nearly as sickening as it was to witness the extent

THE BATTLE LINES HAD BEEN DRAWN





to which federal, state, and local officials attempted to cover up the damage,” said Mike Sturdivant, Chair of the Emerald Coast Chapter.

A person might expect a disaster of this scale to reduce our nation’s enthusiasm for expanding offshore drilling. After all, U.S. coasts have largely enjoyed protection from new drilling since the 1970s. For decades, leaders of both political parties agreed: why expose our coasts to the hazards of new oil drilling? However, in 2008, President Bush and Congress allowed federal protections to lapse, providing the opportunity the oil industry had been waiting for.


The BP oil spill certainly generated appropriate public outrage, but our government has mostly ignored its lessons, failing to pass any laws to improve the

safety and environmental oversight of offshore drilling.

DRILLING PROPONENTS ARE TAKING AIM

In early 2012, the federal government signaled its intentions to open the Atlantic to offshore drilling. Responding to pressure from oil companies, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) announced plans to allow seismic exploration for oil and gas in the Mid- and South Atlantic. The development was a major milestone for an industry desperate to establish a foothold off the East Coast.

The plan’s oil and gas surveys, which could receive final approval this summer, will pave the way for new offshore drilling in the Atlantic. They will also cause major harm to the marine ecosystem before a single rig gets



installed. Using sonic cannons that produce loud explosions underwater, the surveys could injure upwards of 130,000 whales, dolphins and other marine mammals over the next eight years.

Certain members of Congress are also spearheading efforts to promote new offshore drilling. This session, several legislative proposals have been introduced that would require oil and gas development off the East Coast, as well as the West Coast and Alaska.

Finally, just weeks before this article went to press, BOEM released its draft offshore drilling plan for 2017 to 2022. The plan includes new drilling in the Mid- and South Atlantic, as well as the Arctic Ocean. Over the next two years, the Bureau is hosting a series of public hearings and comment opportunities before making its final decision.

SURFRIDER'S NETWORK IS STRIKING BACK

Throughout Surfrider's 30-year history, nothing has activated our grassroots network like having its back against the wall. So as the threat of new offshore drilling has emerged, Surfrider chapters have responded in full force.

In 2012, after plans for the oil and gas surveys were announced, the federal government hosted public meetings along the eastern seaboard. Surfrider leaders capitalized on the opportunity, organizing

large community turnouts and delivering passionate testimony at hearings in Florida, North Carolina, Virginia and New Jersey. Working with coalition partners like Oceana, the Sierra Club, and Clean Ocean Action, Surfrider also persuaded thousands of citizens to submit letters to the Bureau, demonstrating overwhelming opposition to the proposal.

Surfrider chapters also began organizing Hands Across the Sand events to show community opposition to new drilling. Founded by Surfrider member Dave Rauschkolb, the annual event brings citizens together to show support for clean energy solutions to our fossil fuel problems. With Florida chapters leading the way, Surfrider has helped organize over a hundred local events in the past five years. And, planning for this year's event on May 16th is well underway.

Finally, in the wake of the administration's release of its draft offshore drilling plan, Surfrider is doubling its efforts to compel our nation's leaders to protect the Atlantic coast. From lobbying members of Congress to organizing large turnouts at the latest round of public hearings, Surfrider's chapter network is once again proving its mettle.

As the drumbeat to drill in the Atlantic grows louder, Surfrider is continuing to build a groundswell response to meet the challenge. The fate of the Atlantic coast will rest in the hands of coastal advocates like you.

