

# Researcher looks at regulatory muddle in wake of Deepwater Horizon disaster

July 24 2014, by Brendan M. Lynch

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In April 2010, a catastrophic explosion sank the Deepwater Horizon oil rig, operated for the BP company some 50 miles off the Louisiana coast in the Gulf of Mexico. Eleven rig workers lost their lives, and oil gushed freely into Gulf waters for the next 87 days—some 210 million gallons of oil in total. The spill was the worst in U.S. history, and many viewed the government reaction to be inadequate.

A researcher at the University of Kansas recently has investigated how past experiences with hurricanes may have impeded state and local responses to the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

"Because of the size of the spill, it was new," said So-Min Cheong, associate professor of geography. "In addition, it occurred in the Gulf where frequent hurricanes are a norm. In some ways this was a plus as they are used to dealing with disasters, but in other ways this prevented people and local and state governments from addressing the spill well because they are not used to [oil](#)-spill regulations and response."

Cheong first became interested oil spills by a major 2007 accident in South Korea, and she continued her research with help from a Faculty Early Career Development grant from the National Science Foundation in 2012. She has become a noted expert on spills, recently having edited an entire issue of the journal *Ecology and Society* dedicated to the subject.

"Oil is an important resource, and its global transportation and

production always carry the risk of mega-spills that harm the environment and coastal livelihoods," Cheong said. "Regulations and laws serve as preventive measures and response and recovery tools for affected communities and the environment."

In the case of the Deepwater Horizon spill, Cheong found that previous experience with frequent hurricanes in Louisiana altered the response of government and the expectations of citizens.

"Natural-resource damage assessment started soon after the spill," she said. "People were frustrated because initially it seemed like they did not care about human recovery unlike in times of hurricanes. If the expectations are unmet, they generate confusion and resentment, consume the political capital of governments unnecessarily and waste valuable local human resources that could have been employed to respond better."

In particular, Cheong found that government agencies at all levels were hampered by the shift in regulations from the Stafford Act—which effectively empowered local authorities in the response to hurricanes—to the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, which was more of a "top-down" approach. The result was "a heightened sense of uncertainty," according to the researcher.

Going forward, "Understanding the regulations by establishing networks with relevant government agencies and [oil rig](#) owners are important," she said. "For the communities, incorporating the quality-of-life aspect would be useful. For now, environmental assessment exists for compensation purposes, but no holistic assessment of community impact and the quality of life exists. The only mechanism is the compensation of livelihoods that were lost."

Provided by University of Kansas

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