

10 years after BP spill: Oil drilled deeper; rules relaxed

April 18 2020, by Kevin McGill and Matthew Brown



In this undated photo, released by the U.S. Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, an inspector with the U.S. Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement is seen surveying the Gulf of Mexico for pollution. Since the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill companies have been drilling in deeper and deeper waters. (U.S. Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement via AP)

Ten years after an oil rig explosion killed 11 workers and unleashed an environmental nightmare in the Gulf of Mexico, companies are drilling

into deeper and deeper waters, where the payoffs can be huge but the risks are greater than ever.

Industry leaders and [government officials](#) say they're determined to prevent a repeat of BP's Deepwater Horizon disaster. It spilled 134 million gallons of oil that fouled beaches from Louisiana to Florida, killed hundreds of thousands of marine animals and devastated the region's tourist economy.

Yet [safety](#) rules adopted in the spill's aftermath have been eased as part of President Donald Trump's drive to boost U.S. oil production. And government data reviewed by The Associated Press shows the number of safety inspection visits has declined in recent years, although officials say checks of electronic records, safety systems and individual oil rig components have increased.

Today companies are increasingly reliant on production from deeper and inherently more dangerous oil reserves, where drill crews can grapple with ultra-high pressures and oil temperatures that can top 350 degrees (177 degrees Celsius).

Despite almost \$2 billion in spending by the industry on equipment to respond to an oil well blowout like BP's, some scientists, former government officials and environmentalists say safety practices appear to be eroding. And there are worries that cleanup tactics have changed little in decades and are likely to prove as ineffective as they were in 2010.



In this July 13, 2017, released by the U.S. Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, An oil industry facility in the Gulf of Mexico is seen. Ten years after an accident on a BP oil rig killed 11 people and spilled 134 million gallons of crude, the Trump administration has eased safety regulations to encourage energy production. (U.S. Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement via AP)

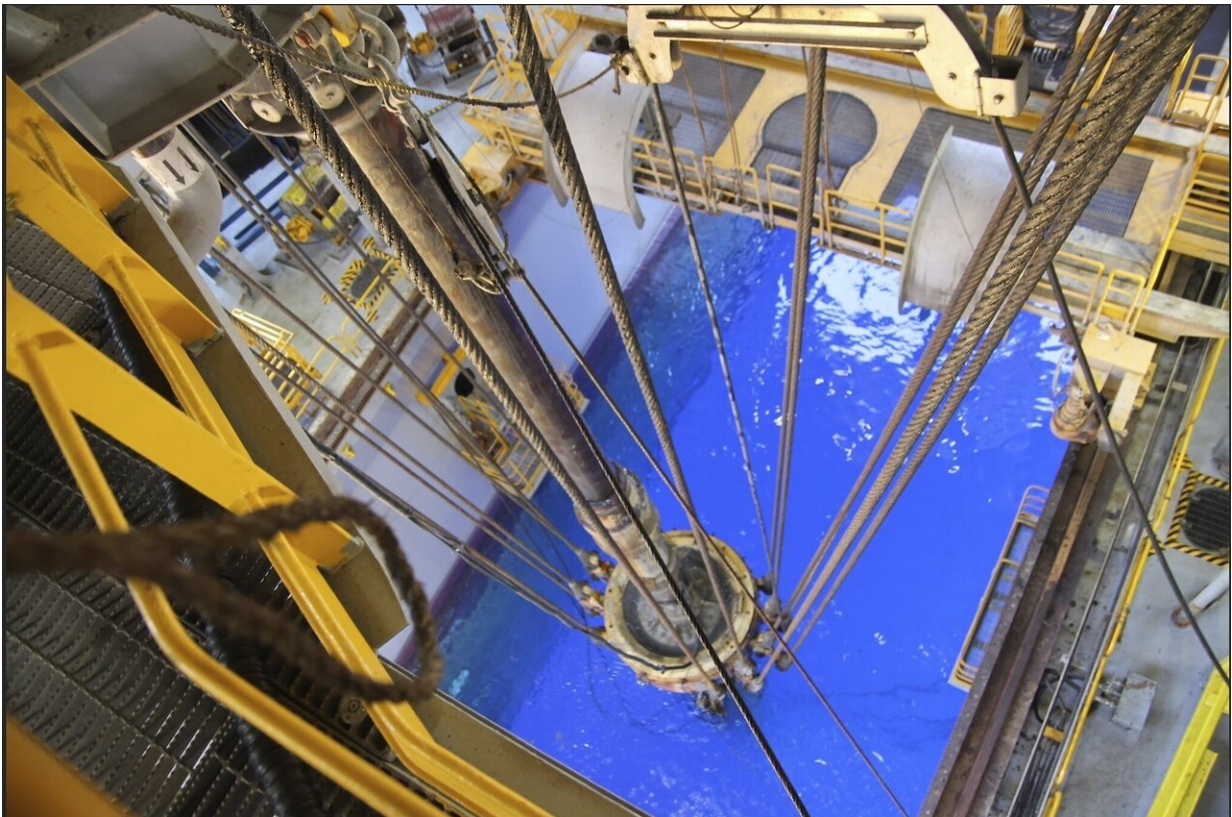
"I'm concerned that in the industry, the lessons aren't fully learned—that we're tending to backslide," said Donald Boesch, a marine science professor at the University of Maryland who was on a federal commission that determined the BP blowout was preventable.

Regulators and industry leaders say they've employed lessons from the April 20, 2010, disaster to make deep-water drilling safer by setting

tougher construction and enforcement standards.

"I think the event 10 years ago really initiated kind of a new day in offshore safety," said Debra Phillips, of the American Petroleum Institute, a standards-setting trade association.

Companies have a financial interest in preventing a repeat of the 2010 disaster, which cost BP more than \$69 billion in cleanup, fines, fees and settlements. Questions over environmental effects linger, and litigation continues over [health problems](#) suffered by cleanup workers.



In this July 13, 2017, released by the U.S. Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, An oil industry facility in the Gulf of Mexico is seen. Oil wells in

waters at least 1,000 feet deep now account for about 90 percent of crude from the Gulf, one of the world's largest offshore oil fields. (U.S. Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement via AP)

Competing oil giants joined in the disaster's wake to create the Marine Well Containment Co., which has equipment and vessels positioned regionwide to quickly corral oil if another major spill occurs.

"All of (the) industry wanted to make sure that nothing like it could ever happen again," said CEO David Nickerson, at the company's complex near Corpus Christi on Texas' coast.

He was dwarfed by "capping stacks"—multistory structures of piping, valves and gauges designed to be lowered to halt a major [high-pressure](#) blowout.

The hope is that such equipment won't be needed. Yet the Trump administration has relaxed rules adopted in 2016, including the frequency of drilling rig safety tests. That's projected to save energy companies roughly \$1.7 billion in compliance costs over a decade.

An AP review found the number of safety inspection visits by the U.S. Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement—created after the spill—went down more than 20% over the past six years in the Gulf.



In this July 24, 2018, photo released by the U.S. Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, engineers from the bureau inspect an oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico. Inspection visits have been declining in the years since the Deepwater Horizon accident killed 11 people and spilled 134 million gallons of oil in the Gulf. (U.S. Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement via AP)

Industry advocates say inspection figures reflect greater emphasis on complex systems that influence safety rather than minor technical matters, and note there are fewer, if bigger, active oil platforms. They say the administration's rule changes allow companies to deviate from "one-size-fits-all" standards not always suited to water pressure and other conditions at individual wells.

"Sometimes, when the regulations are quite prescriptive, it can actually inadvertently deteriorate safety," said Phillips, of the American Petroleum Institute.

Environmentalists and critics say the changes appear to be eroding safety practices adopted after the spill.

"The industry itself is in the lead in trying to reduce its risk and protect its workers," said Bob Deans of the National Resources Defense Council, one of several environmental groups suing over Trump administration changes. "The problem comes when you're behind schedule, over budget and pressure comes from on top to get the job done and move on to the next project. That was the problem on Deepwater Horizon."



This April 21, 2010 file photo shows the Deepwater Horizon oil rig burning after an explosion in the Gulf of Mexico, off the southeast tip of Louisiana. Ten years after an oil rig explosion killed 11 workers and unleashed an environmental nightmare in the Gulf of Mexico, companies are drilling into deeper and deeper

waters where the payoffs can be huge but the risks are greater than ever. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert, File)

The federal commission that studied the accident and the federal judge who oversaw myriad lawsuits put the blame on BP for poor management. In a key court ruling, U.S. District Judge Carl Barbier said "profit-driven decisions" on the rig were made in "conscious disregard of known risks."

Debate over the strength of regulation and industry safety consciousness goes on as wells close to shore run dry and companies drill in [deeper waters](#) farther offshore.

The average depth of deep water drilling steadily increased, from about 3,500 feet (1,070 meters) beneath the surface in 1999 to more than 4,600 feet (1,400 meters) in 2019, according to an AP analysis of data from the U.S. Interior Department's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management.

That's an increase of about 32%.

Drilling deeper makes well sites harder to reach in a blowout or other accident.



This April 21, 2010 file photo shows oil in the Gulf of Mexico, more than 50 miles southeast of Venice on Louisiana's tip, as the Deepwater Horizon oil rig burns. Ten years after an oil rig explosion killed 11 workers and unleashed an environmental nightmare in the Gulf of Mexico, companies are drilling into deeper and deeper waters where the payoffs can be huge but the risks are greater than ever. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert, File)

In the past year, the industry began producing crude for the first time from ultra-high pressure crude reserves in the Gulf. Overall production hit a record 2 million barrels a day before the coronavirus pandemic caused demand to plummet.

Pressures in those wells can approach 20,000 pounds per square inch, compared with almost 12,000 pounds for Deepwater Horizon.

"Higher risk, higher pressure, higher temperatures, more reliance on technology—it's just a tougher environment to operate in," said Lois Epstein, a civil engineer at the Wilderness Society who served on a government advisory committee post-spill.

Trump administration changes have intensified debate over how tightly the government should regulate, and what decisions should be left to industry professionals.

Much of the discussion centers on rules intended to keep wells under control, such as requirements for blowout preventers that failed in the spill.



In this July 24, 2018, released by the U.S. Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, Engineers from the U.S. Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement inspect a Gulf of Mexico oil platform. Oil companies say they are better prepared for accidents 10 years after BP's Deepwater Horizon disaster, but some scientists and former agency officials say the Trump administration's move to ease safety regulations are cause for worry. (U.S. Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement via AP)

The 2016 rule required companies to test the blowout preventers every 14 days. The Trump administration allows companies to test every 21 days, saying more frequent testing would risk equipment failure.

As deep-water activity has expanded, the number of inspections carried out by the government's safety bureau has declined.

Inspections fell from 4,712 in 2013 to 3,717 in 2019, according to government data reviewed by AP.

Bureau spokesman Sandy Day said the inspection figures reflect visits by inspectors to rigs, platforms and other facilities. Day said the data doesn't reflect electronic records reviewed remotely or the increased time spent at each facility and all inspection tasks performed. Those, he said, have increased from 9,287 in 2017 to 12,489 last year. The agency didn't provide a breakdown.



In this Tuesday March 10, 2020 photo, the five cap stacks built by Marine Well Containment Company undergo rigorous pressure testing at the company yard in Ingleside, Texas. The devices help containment oil from blown out wells like the BP operated Macondo prospect which devastated the Gulf of Mexico ten years ago. (AP Photo/John L. Mone)

"While on the facility we did numerous inspections of different items," Day said, including equipment for preventing blowouts, fires, spills, or other major accidents. He said electronic records allow more work to be done from shore, rather than digging through paperwork on site.

The number of warnings and citations issued to companies for safety or environmental violations peaked in 2012 and has since fallen even faster than inspections. The decline accelerated under the current

administration, agency documents show.

Fewer inspection visits and fewer citations suggests the safety improvements that took hold after the 2010 spill are unraveling, said Matt Lee-Ashley, former deputy chief of staff at the Interior Department.

"There is a value in having inspectors on board frequently. You have to establish a culture of enforcement," said Lee-Ashley, now with the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning advocacy group.



In this Tuesday March 10, 2020 photo, David Nickerson, CEO of Marine Well Containment Company, describes the function of five cap stacks engineered by the not-for-profit disaster response consortium, in Ingleside, Texas. MWCC was created after the BP Oil disaster devastated the Gulf of Mexico ten years ago.

(AP Photo/John L. Mone)

Industry representatives maintain that inspection numbers don't automatically translate to less effective oversight. Inspectors are less interested than in the past in technical violations and are focused on making sure comprehensive [safety systems](#) are in place to prevent major accidents, said Erik Milito, of industry trade group the National Ocean Industries Association.

"If you think about going out with a checklist and see if there are enough eyewash bottles, everybody has steel-toed shoes—you can do that, and bounce around from facility to facility," he said. "But there's got to be an emphasis on your more significant potential incidents, potential blowouts."

At the center of the debate is the agency formed to enforce offshore safety after Deepwater Horizon, the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, and its director under Trump, Scott Angelle.



In this Tuesday March 10, 2020 photo, David Nickerson, CEO of Marine Well Containment Company, points to the hydrocarbon train that fits on top a oil spill disaster response tanker, in Ingleside, Texas. The device helps process spilled oil and other hydrocarbons. It also helps collect oil spewing out of blown out deep sea wells for storage in oil tankers hulls.(AP Photo/John L. Mone)

Angelle, a former Louisiana official who was a paid board member for an oil logistics company, has faced criticism from Democratic lawmakers and environmentalists for pushing through the relaxed safety rules against agency staff advice.

During a hearing last month before the House Natural Resources Committee, Rep. Mike Levin, D-Calif., accused Angelle of trying to hide information that didn't support the administration's goal of

loosening regulations for petroleum companies.

Angelle said initial staff recommendations to keep the two-week testing frequency for blowout preventers "were not ready and ripe." His office later released an Argonne National Laboratory study that concluded relaxing the testing regimen would have cost benefits and could improve safety, since frequent equipment testing can cause wear and tear that results in accidents.

Michael Bromwich, the safety agency's director under Obama, credited the industry for taking action after the spill to overhaul drilling. But as time passed, Bromwich said companies became complacent and are now overseen by a man he calls an industry booster.



In this May 19, 2010 file photo, boat captain Preston Morris shows the oil on his hands while collecting surface samples from the oil impacted marsh of Pass a Loutre, La. on Wednesday. Oil from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill is infiltrating the coast of Louisiana. Ten years after an oil rig explosion killed 11 workers and unleashed an environmental nightmare in the Gulf of Mexico, companies are drilling into deeper and deeper waters where the payoffs can be huge but the risks are greater than ever. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert, File)

"You need to have somebody who believes in the regulatory mission and who doesn't view themselves and doesn't view their agency as a cheerleader for the industry," Bromwich said.

Requests over several weeks to interview Angelle were declined. Spokesman Day said the director wants to make the bureau a "do-it-all" agency that can protect safety and the environment while advancing Trump's goal of U.S. "energy dominance" globally.

Even if companies are prepared for another Deepwater Horizon, they could be overwhelmed by other accidents, such as of one of the Gulf's frequent underwater mudslides wiping out a cluster of wellheads on the seafloor, said Florida State University oceanographer Ian MacDonald.

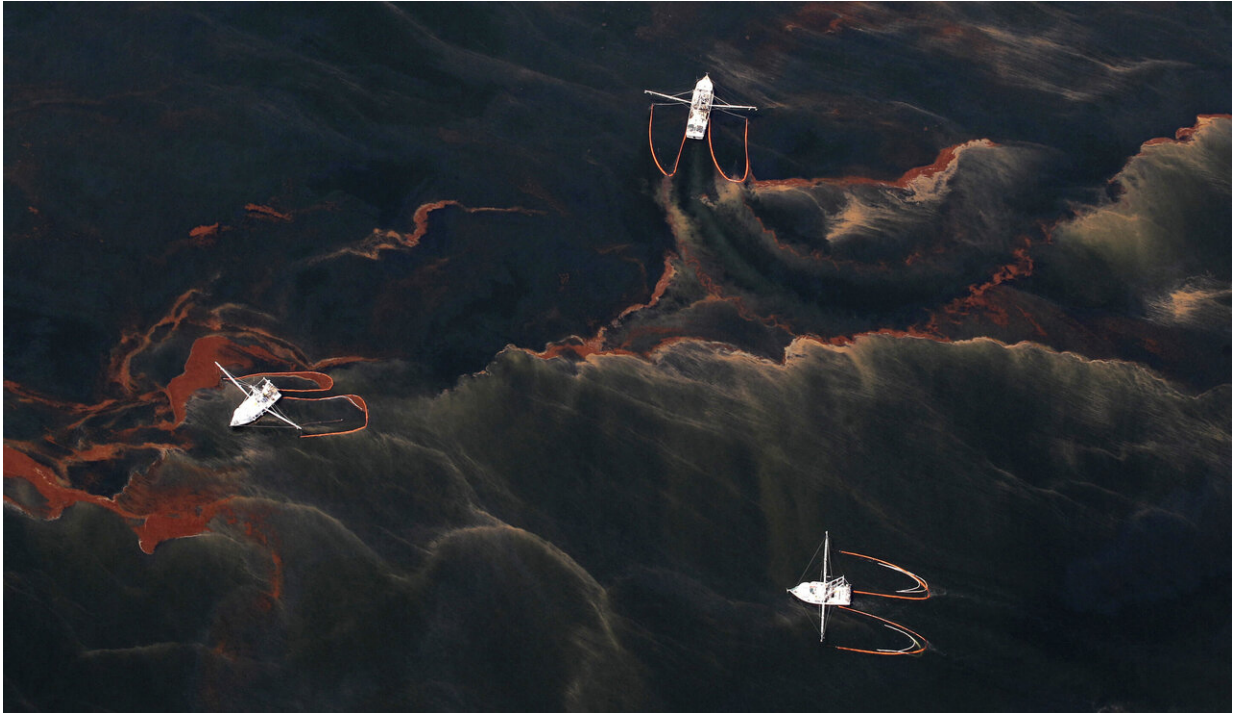
That could trigger a blowout that would be harder to stop due to the damaged wellheads being possibly hundreds of feet deep in muddy debris, said MacDonald, who helped determine the magnitude of the 2010 spill.



In this June 3, 2010 file photo, a Brown Pelican is mired in oil from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, on the beach at East Grand Terre Island along the Louisiana coast. Ten years after an oil rig explosion killed 11 workers and unleashed an environmental nightmare in the Gulf of Mexico, companies are drilling into deeper and deeper waters where the payoffs can be huge but the risks are greater than ever. (AP Photo/Charlie Riedel, File)



In this May 5, 2010 file photo, oil and oil sheen are seen moving past an oil rig, top right, in the waters of Chandeleur Sound, La. Ten years after an oil rig explosion killed 11 workers and unleashed an environmental nightmare in the Gulf of Mexico, companies are drilling into deeper and deeper waters where the payoffs can be huge but the risks are greater than ever. (AP Photo/Eric Gay, File)



In this May 5, 2010 file photo, shrimp boats are used to collect oil with booms in the waters of Chandeleur Sound, La. Ten years after an oil rig explosion killed 11 workers and unleashed an environmental nightmare in the Gulf of Mexico, companies are drilling into deeper and deeper waters where the payoffs can be huge but the risks are greater than ever. (AP Photo/Eric Gay, File)

In addition to having ships and barges standing by to capture oil that escapes from accidents, the industry has stockpiled chemical dispersants to break up oil and it can mobilize thousands of workers to clean up crude that reaches the shore.

But the heavy use of dispersants during Deepwater Horizon stirred controversy both over its effectiveness and biological effects. And scientists say the technology applied to shore cleanups remains as rudimentary as it was 10 years ago.

Crews relied heavily on hand tools such as shovels and absorbent paper towels sometimes called "oil diapers." Much of the crude was deemed unrecoverable and left to break down over time.

"It's something you could have done 100 years ago," said Louisiana State University engineering professor John Pardue. "We're still moving oil around with minimum wage workers with their hands."

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Citation: 10 years after BP spill: Oil drilled deeper; rules relaxed (2020, April 18) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-04-years-bp-oil-drilled-deeper.html>

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