

ALERT:
THE SLICK GOES ON AND WHO IS IN CHARGE?
By Dr. Martha A. Madden

Eleven people missing and presumed dead. A 210,000 gallon-a-day oil leak now caught up in the Gulf of Mexico's Loop Current. A fishing ban issued that extends 46,000 square miles. On June 11, 2010, the equivalent of the Exxon Valdez oil spill, 11,000,000 gallons, will have been released into the Gulf of Mexico. One month after what will become this country's worst man made disaster, the slick goes on and who's in charge?

The finger pointing exercises started at the nation's Capitol during committee hearings and continues at every level of federal, state, and local government. Meanwhile, clean up efforts resemble trying to get a drink of water from a fire hose.

A large dome was lowered to the sea floor to capture the oil. While that method has been successful in shallow waters, it had never been attempted in 5,000 feet of water. Robot submarines attempted to close off the flow of oil by activating a shutoff device at the well head known as a blowout preventer. The robotic activity was not successful neither was the blowout preventer. More attempts were made to replace the blowout preventer. Learning from one failed attempt, positioning another dome over the well head but injecting heated water or methanol to prevent crystals from forming as was the case on the first dome.

Another deepwater rig is being moved toward the explosion site to drill relief wells if needed but this process would take several months and is not an easy process. A similar well blowout in Australia where a relief well was drilled took 4 months to intersect the previous well and pump down enough mud to shut off the flow.

Cleanup workers' safety has not been addressed. One month after the Valdez disaster, a team of public health experts identified the potential health hazards of cleanup workers. Acute actions/reactions include skin contact and inhalation of crude oil or its vapors that can cause dizziness, nausea and skin rashes. Chronic actions/reactions include kidney and nervous system damage, and some cancers (<http://www.defending-science.org/upload/Exxon-Valdez-Public-health-team-assessment.pdf>).

The question keeps being asked, who is in charge, while everyone's patience is running thin along the coastal areas of the Gulf of Mexico? Families who make a living from tourism and harvesting fish, shrimp, and oysters from the coastal regions of the Gulf are already experiencing financial hardships which can turn into financial ruin in a matter of another month. For daily updates on the oil leak go to NOAA's Office of Response and Restoration website: [http://www.response.restoration.noaa.gov/topic_subtopic_entry.php?RECORD_KEY%28entry_subtopic_topic%29=entry_id,subtopic_id,topic_id&entry_id\(entry_subtopic_topic\)=809&subtopic_id\(entry_subtopic_topic\)=2&topic_id\(entry_subtopic_topic\)=1](http://www.response.restoration.noaa.gov/topic_subtopic_entry.php?RECORD_KEY%28entry_subtopic_topic%29=entry_id,subtopic_id,topic_id&entry_id(entry_subtopic_topic)=809&subtopic_id(entry_subtopic_topic)=2&topic_id(entry_subtopic_topic)=1).

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