

# Are More Oil Spills Inevitable?

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Posted: May 5, 2010 02:06 PM

The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, while an environmental tragedy in so many respects, also could not have come at a worse time for advocates of drilling off of America's coasts. The image of hundreds of thousands of gallons of oil daily spilling into the Gulf of Mexico is a far more eloquent and powerful rebuttal to those who want to "drill baby, drill" than any words could have been. However, if the primary lesson which we take from this oil spill is that we should not drill for oil off of our shores, than we have missed the point.

To a substantial extent the "drill baby, drill" slogan from 2008 was not so much a serious policy proposal as an emphatic verbal jab aimed at the environmental movement and the other alleged elites who recognized the seriousness of climate change and the need to change our behavior accordingly. It was a way for Sarah Palin and her supporters to all but shout down the knowledge and environmental realities that threatened their way of life. "Drill baby, drill" was not so much an energy policy but a statement about one's views towards science, the environment and a complex and changing world. It also succeeded in precluding a serious national discussion about energy policy

The "drill baby, drill" crowd is also an attractive straw man for the debate about offshore drilling. Drilling for oil simply as a way to demonstrate that you believe that climate change is a fiction and that every American has the unequivocal right to use as much fossil fuel as possible, which seemed to be the argument behind this slogan, is a position that is easy to refute. It is also not particularly relevant to serious conversations about whether or not we should drill off of our coasts.

The question of whether or not to drill offshore is something of a false construct anyway, because it is meaningless in the absence of other options. There are, of course, other options. We don't have to get our oil by drilling offshore. We can get it by tapping into our reserves or by buying it from somewhere else. If we decide to tap our reserves, we are doing little more than postponing the question about whether or not to drill offshore. Getting our oil from somewhere else, in addition to deeply complicating US foreign policy, is obviously not without an environmental impact. Carbon released by driving a car powered by oil from the Middle East, Central Asia or elsewhere, for example, still contributes to climate change.

This spill is nonetheless significant because the oil is leaking out into the sea where it will damage marine life, make it more difficult to fish and cause other harm to the area. This is an environmental disaster that cannot be ignored, but that probably will occur again if we increase offshore oil drilling and do not strengthen safety and environmental regulations. However, as anybody who can recall the Exxon Valdez spill in 1989 knows, not all marine oil spills are due to drilling offshore. The Valdez was a tanker transporting oil, not a rig drilling for oil.

The current spill is worse than the Valdez, but stopping offshore oil drilling does not eliminate the risk, or perhaps the inevitability, that similar accidents will happen. Even oil that gets extracted from the deserts of the Middle East, Central Asia or the frozen Russian North has to be moved closer to consumers. This process relies upon networks of pipelines and shipping which can also fail leading to oil spills with disastrous environmental consequences.

The ongoing disaster in the Gulf of Mexico is, therefore, a stark reminder not only of the perils of offshore oil drilling, but of the inevitable consequences of continuing dependence of fossil fuels. Determining whether, when and where to drill is a difficult question, made more difficult because we are currently staring at what can go wrong with offshore drilling. However, these are not stand alone questions, but can only be answered in the context of a broader energy policy which includes incentives to move our country toward becoming less dependent on fossil fuels. The belief held by many progressives -- that we have to change our way of living and our dependence on fossil fuels in order to combat climate change -- was what initially sparked the backlash and enthusiasm from Palin and her followers. Recent events only underscore that these ideas, which are not new, are even more relevant now. President Obama understood this two years ago, and it was reflected in his campaign rhetoric during the election. The slow leak of oil into the Gulf of Mexico and the expanding oil slick on top of the Gulf are more reminders of the urgency of this problem.