

In wake of Deepwater Horizon catastrophe in 2010

Obama administration issued over 1,000 offshore fracking permits in Gulf of Mexico

By Gary Joad
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On June 24, a joint investigation between the online magazine Truthout and the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) revealed that the Obama administration issued some 1,200 to 1,500 offshore hydro-fracking permits for BP, Shell Oil and other petroleum giants from 2010-2014, after the BP oil spill, the worst environmental disaster in US history.

Fracking involves the pumping of enormous quantities of water, sand, and a slurry of extremely toxic compounds, many of which are carcinogens, into the gas- and oil-containing subsurface and rock to crack open and extract petroleum. The process produces large amounts of toxic waste, which poses serious environmental hazards, as well as serious health risks to humans who are exposed to it.

At the same time, fracking has become a major component of the oil industry in the United States, and has played a major role in the expansion of the US oil industry at the expense of its foreign rivals. CNN noted in January 2015 that during the Obama administration's tenure, an oil boom had occurred with an increase in production of 72 percent, or some 3.6 million more barrels a day, primarily due to the increased use of fracking, surpassing the oil production of Saudi Arabia in the summer of 2014.

Truthout and the CBD obtained the information in their report from a lawsuit against the federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) and the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) after they refused to release records under the Freedom of Information Act. The two agencies were created by the Obama administration after the BP oil spill in 2010 to provide fig-leaf "oversight" of the offshore oil industry, while continuing to rubber-stamp their

activities. They reached an agreement with the CBD for a partial release of offshore fracking records, implying that the true extent of such practices are even more extensive.

Kristen Monsell, an attorney for the CBD, noted in the press release: "The Obama administration is essentially letting oil companies frack at will in gulf ecosystems and dump billions of gallons of oil waste into coastal waters. Every offshore frack increases the risk to wildlife and coastal communities yet federal officials have been just rubber-stamping this toxic practice in the Gulf of Mexico for years."

The government exercises little oversight in the issuing of these permits. The CBD noted that the administration had concurrently issued so called "categorical exclusions" for at least 300 fracking projects, meaning that no prior or follow-up environmental impact statements were required for designated projects. The CBD provided this interactive map of offshore hydro-fracking permits off the Gulf Coast.

Significantly, the exemption list included the Deepwater Horizon BP drilling platform that exploded on April 20, 2010, killing 11 workers, and which leaked 200 million gallons of raw crude into the Gulf over the course of 87 days. The CBD notes that more federal permits for fracking were actually issued by the Obama government while BP's Macondo Well continued to leak oil throughout the summer.

The CBD reported that in 2014 alone, at least 630 wells were fracked off the coast of Alabama, Texas, Mississippi and Louisiana, and that the US government permitted the dumping of over 76 billion gallons of toxic waste fluid into the Gulf. The CBD's press

release also noted that the administration issued a permit last year for a fracking job on Shell Oil Well Number 8 in the Glider Field, 95 miles from Port Fourchon, Louisiana, which ruptured and blew out some 90,000 gallons of crude in the Gulf in May of this year.

An earlier report by the CBD, which was released in September 2014, revealed that the federal government had permitted fracking of some 200 oil and gas wells off the coast of southern California near Huntington Beach, Long Beach, Seal Beach, and in the Santa Barbara Channel. Most of the fracking, and a routine of frack waste water dumping, occurred in much shallower seas and nearer the coasts than in the Gulf.

Most of the frack jobs were within three miles of the coastline. Moreover, at least 1,500 very high pressure offshore injection wells, which are used to “dispose” of frack water, are situated near both the coastlines and within three miles of active geologic fault lines.

The federal government also permits the petroleum giants to dump 9 billion gallons of fracking waste along the Southern California coast each year. The well casings from older wells are also known to crack and leak under the extraordinarily high intensity pressure of fracking, causing leaks of the toxic slurries into the shallow seas of southern California. This contributes to the region’s already notoriously poor air quality, and includes benzene, a known carcinogen, identified in ambient air over coastal communities.

The use of this controversial and environmentally destructive practice in the Gulf of Mexico, however, threatens an ecosystem already devastated by the BP oil spill. The environmental impact of the spill is not yet fully understood, in large measure due to stonewalling by BP and the federal government. For its role in the disaster, for which not a single high-ranking company executive has been convicted, BP was fined a paltry \$20 billion, a fraction of the maximum possible fine under US law.

The local fishing industry and associated businesses are still being hit hard by the ongoing environmental impact of the spill. For example, oyster catches in Louisiana plummeted by 68 percent in the years after the spill. Oil tar balls continue to appear on the shores of the Gulf Coast, more than six years after the spill. The very existence of portions of the southern coast of Louisiana were threatened by the spill, where

vegetation, which holds the loose, marshy soil in place with its roots, were choked by the crude oil washing ashore. Due in part to the environmentally destructive practices of the oil industry, Louisiana loses more than the equivalent of a football field of marshlands every hour.

Significantly, the Obama administration had sanctioned the use of another toxic compound, chemical oil dispersants during the “clean-up” effort, whose direction it left in the hands of BP. BP used 1.8 million gallons of dispersants to break up oil on the surface and push them below the water surface, away from the prying eyes of the television news cameras.

As many as 48,000 cleanup workers were exposed to these toxic substances, whose long term effects are now understood to cause serious respiratory problems, possible liver and kidney failure, and cancer. A report from early this year by Truthout quoted a federal study of the health effects of dispersants, which found that “the acute neurotoxic effects of organic solvent exposure in workers and laboratory animals are narcosis, anesthesia, central nervous system (CNS) depression, respiratory arrest, unconsciousness, and death.”

Six years after the worst environmental catastrophe in American history, nothing has been done to seriously address the environmental catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico; indeed, the Obama administration is on course to ensure even more serious devastation to one of the most complex and fragile ecosystems in the world.

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