

BP oil well blowout in North Alaska

By Matthew Taylor
18 April 2017

An oil well in the remote North Slope area of Alaska suffered a blowout last Friday, sending natural gas and crude oil onto the surrounding area. Repair crews managed to contain the oil leak by Sunday, but had still not managed to stop the escape of natural gas as of Monday afternoon.

The cause of the leak as well as the volume of oil and gas emitted into the surrounding wilderness is still unknown. Alaska state officials have stated that no injuries or harm to wildlife have been reported at this time.

Officials from BP, the oil company that owns the well, have claimed that the oil spill was restricted to the surrounding well pad and that no crude oil reached the tundra. The company also stated that it plans to discontinue production at the well once the natural gas leak has been repaired.

The credibility of BP's public assurances must be judged by its past performance. The company is responsible for one of the greatest environmental disasters in history, the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, which leaked an estimated 4.9 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.

Eleven oil workers were killed in the explosion which led to the leak, and seventeen injured. Many thousands of additional workers who participated in the cleanup were also sickened. The full extent of the impact on human health is still being assessed today.

The damage to marine life was also extensive and aggravated by the company's deployment of the toxic oil dispersant Corexit.

Repairs on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig took five months to complete. In that time, company officials continuously lied to the public about the extent of the damage, the volume of oil being leaked, and the potential harm to human and marine life.

In subsequent court proceedings, the company and its personnel were found to be guilty of multiple felonies,

including manslaughter. A federal court in 2014 ruled that BP was responsible for the disaster and the company ultimately agreed to pay \$13.7 billion in fines. This is in addition to the \$42.2 billion the company had already paid in civil and criminal penalties.

The Alaskan oil spill is the just the latest in a series of energy-related environmental catastrophes.

In December of last year, 12,615 barrels of oil spilled into a tributary of the Little Missouri River near Belfield, North Dakota when the Belle Fourche pipeline sprang a leak. Like many oil-related accidents in that state, the pipeline leak happened in a remote area and officials estimate that the leak was ongoing for at least four days before it was discovered. State officials initially downplayed the extent of the leak, which contaminated a nearby hill as well as the Ash Coulee creek. Environmental testing of the creek has shown elevated levels of the carcinogenic chemical benzene.

The Belle Fourche spill was among the largest pipeline spills of 2016, and the second largest in the state's relatively brief history as an oil producer. The largest was a spill in 2013 that spewed over 20,600 barrels of oil across a 7.3 acre spread of land near Tioga, ND. Lawmakers in that state recently passed legislation relaxing regulations on reporting of oil spills.

On March 20, the Coast Guard in Louisiana was called out to clean up a spill of 840 gallons of crude oil into the Mississippi River. The spill was caused when an abandoned wellhead owned by Hilcorp Energy failed.

That was just one of an estimated 1,500 spills reported in that state each year. The Louisiana Department of public safety reports that approximately 330,000 gallons of oil are spilled in that state per year, representing 20 percent of all oil spilled in the U.S.

annually.

In Shelby County, Alabama in 2016, the Colonial Pipeline was damaged twice in the course of two months, spilling a combined total of 588,000 gallons of refined gas and oil. Two workers were killed and another four injured in the incidents. The spills also caused a temporary spike in gas prices throughout the southeast, affecting millions of motorists.

In 2003, the Colonial pipeline company paid a civil penalty of \$34 million to the Environmental Protection Agency after it was found that multiple oil spills from the company's facilities during the late 1990s had caused "significant environmental damage" to southeastern waterways.

In addition to the Deepwater Horizon spill, other facilities operated by BP have been at the center of many of the most notable petroleum-related accidents in recent years.

In 2005, an explosion at the company's Texas City Refinery killed 15 workers and injured 180 more. An investigation by the US Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board found that the disaster was largely the result of cost-cutting measures undertaken by the company and that BP had failed to implement multiple safety procedures before the accident. The company was charged with multiple criminal violations of environmental laws and was given an initial fine of \$21 million by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). In 2009, the company was fined an additional \$87 million when it was found to have failed to address the safety hazards that led to the Texas City explosion.

In 2006, a corroded pipeline in northern Alaska jointly controlled by BP, ExxonMobil and ConocoPhillips burst, releasing 212,252 gallons of crude oil into the surrounding wilderness. Once again, investigators found the company to be responsible for the accident. The company had knowingly failed to perform the required maintenance on the pipeline and had ignored multiple warnings from its own employees. BP and its partners subsequently paid a \$20 million fine for the accident and an additional \$255 million to the state of Alaska.

In studying the aftermath of each of these incidents a pattern emerges. A large energy company such as BP, which in 2016 reported total assets of \$263.3 billion, causes an environmental disaster through a

combination of negligence and a deliberate disregard for safety measures that could cut into their profit margins. Public outrage ensues, and investigations find the company to be criminally liable. Fines are levied, which the company's lawyers have reduced through subsequent litigation. Lawsuits by workers affected by the disaster are filed, which the company ties up for years in court hearings.

Occasionally, if the incident is especially horrible, such as the Deepwater Horizon spill, an executive may be removed. But then it's back to business as usual. BP and the other major oil companies are among the largest and most profitable companies on the planet. Fines, even in the tens of billions of dollars, are not enough to prevent them from engaging in hazardous business practices that endanger the environment and human health. That can only be achieved under a socialist program with the seizure of the energy companies and their conversion into publicly owned and managed utilities.

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