

Could Gulf of Mexico spill happen here?

David Whiting, Orange County Register, 6-29-10

With oil fouling the Gulf of Mexico, the leader of the state's team that inspects three oil rigs off Orange County explains why he sleeps soundly.

It's what he calls the "responsibility, professionalism and knowledge" of his inspectors as well as the workers who man the offshore oil platforms.

Behind Pete Johnson is a poster-size photograph of a platform, sun setting, twinkling lights. Beyond the window is the ARCO building along Long Beach's waterfront.

His statement and the images may tempt one to dismiss guys like Johnson, people who work for the Mineral Resources Management Division of the state's Lands Commission, the agency charged with inspecting offshore rigs. Like some, Johnson's even worked both sides of the fence, first as a roustabout then as a manager after getting his engineering degree.

But after preparing for what turns out to be a two-hour interview, more time figuring out some technical aspects and a review of what the Lands Commission inspects, Johnson's statement rings true.

It's even echoed by Gary Brown, founder and president of the nonprofit environmental group, Orange County Coastkeeper. "We've reviewed the records and documents. We've gone out there numerous times with boats. I have to honestly say we've never identified any particular problem."

Johnson also puts his money on his word. He lives in Huntington Beach, within sight of Emmy, Esther and Eva – the three platforms in state waters less than three miles from the sand near his house.

There are a few other things that makes one a believer. One is the way Johnson defines safety: "When I'm talking safety, I'm talking pollution."

The other is blunt honesty.

"There's no way to guarantee there won't be a spill."

These are not the best of times to ask an oil company or the feds to visit an offshore rig. Go figure.

Excuses ranged from no room on helicopters, to liability, to no time. One vice president just hung up. But the state was different.

Could what happened in the Gulf happen here?

While I'm no expert, I discovered far more differences than similarities between what went on in the gulf and what could happen off Orange County.

"It's easier drilling on the moon," Johnson said of BP's attempts to drill in the gulf.

First, BP was drilling 5,000 feet below the water's surface. Picture Saddleback mountain at 5,600 feet and you get the idea. The Huntington Beach rigs are less than 100 feet from the ocean floor.

Second, our wells are mature wells with all safety mechanisms in place. BP was drilling an exploratory well.

Without going into the complex chain of events leading to the explosion that, as Johnson noted, also "claimed 11 souls," BP was in the process of putting on a cement cap when the accident occurred.

The pressure in the oil well in the Gulf was 15,000-20,000 pounds per square inch. The pressures at Emmy, Esther and Eva range from 500-1,000 p.s.i. And only a few of the wells are what's called "self flowing."

That means that even if there were a blowout here, it would be minor compared to what we're seeing in the gulf.

Putting it in oil terms, BP's mess leaks about 40,000 barrels a day. The offshore rigs under the state's jurisdiction, including those in Long Beach and Ventura County, produce 5,400 barrels a day – combined.

The combined take for taxpayers from all the state offshore wells? About \$400 million a year.

Worried about drops of oil? Think molecules. Eva, Esther and Emmy, Johnson explains, are closed systems. Even vapor's not allowed to leak.

To ensure everything is operating correctly, Johnson has a team of three inspectors and one supervisor-inspector stationed year-round at the field office in Huntington Beach.

The review process includes daily visits, monthly inspections, an annual review and a comprehensive five-year audit that takes six months to complete.

The first round of audits of all facilities in state waters was completed five years ago. It found 5,500 action items; 98 percent were fixed within a year at a cost of \$5 million. The latest comprehensive audit found half the number of deficiencies.

Triumph or failure?

"If we're finding new or hidden issues, the system's working," Johnson says.

He credits the record to the dedication, integrity and professionalism of people on both sides, something he doesn't do when talking about BP. He also points out people lose jobs if there's a failure, something he saw happen when he started his career in Huntington Beach in 1969.

That was the year photos of oil-soaked birds dominated the news after what was then the worst oil spill in the U.S. – a blowout six miles off Santa Barbara. The spill brought an end to oil exploration off this nation's Pacific and Atlantic coasts.

While Eva and Emmy were built in the 1960s, they are constantly updated with new technology. A few years ago, there were 200 items on the monthly inspections. Today there are 340.

Subsea pipelines, for example, are tested twice: First, electromagnetic "pigs" are inserted in the lines to measure structural strength. Later, the pipelines are tested with water under high pressure.

The results are measured over time so weaknesses can be detected and resolved before they become a problem. Anything found defective is either fixed immediately or that part of the system is shut down.

In an earthquake zone, how sturdy are the platforms?

The main corner legs are each secured with four to 12 pilings that reach 90-120 feet into the sea floor. Even the onslaught of storms that took out the Seal Beach pier in 1983 did little to the platforms.

That wasn't the case with Esther when it was an oil island. On March 1, 1983, a series of powerful waves turned Esther into underwater rubble. Some 30 wells were classified as "severely damaged." But the Society for Petroleum Engineers – and others – reported the environmental impact was minimal. The safety system worked.

Still, I'm hoping for a date with Esther, Emmy and Eva. And I'd like to meet their four sisters in federal waters, Edith, Elly, Ellen and Eureka.

Maybe they're on Match.com.