

Climate change is the true crisis

West Virginia's mining disaster and the Gulf of Mexico oil spill were disastrous and investigations are justified, but the real threat is much worse.

Los Angeles Times, 5-11-10

To paraphrase Oscar Wilde: One deadly explosion while extracting fossil fuels may be regarded as a misfortune, but two within a month looks like carelessness. That's the problem lawmakers are wrestling with amid hearings and federal investigations of the Upper Big Branch mine blast in West Virginia and the BP oil rig collapse in the Gulf of Mexico. We're pleased to see that the reactive machinery is functioning, and confident that it will result in regulations to better protect miners and oil workers. But we can't help thinking that our representatives are missing the signs of a far more destructive crisis in the making.

Coal and oil have more in common than a tendency to produce explosions when mistakes are made in the extraction process. Together, they account for the main reason the Earth's climate is gradually changing. The deaths of 29 mine workers and 11 oil workers were tragic, and the economic consequences of the oil spill to the gulf's fishing and tourism industries could be devastating, but they're dwarfed by the deaths and financial losses that will come with global warming.

Climate change is a little like weight loss: When you're on a diet, it's hard to see the fat melting away day to day, but compare photos of yourself before and after losing 20 pounds and the difference is dramatic. Our political system functions well when it's reacting to a discrete disaster such as a mine explosion, but a slow-motion catastrophe such as climate change doesn't spur the same outrage because most people don't see it happening until long after the damage is done.

Thus, we're a little bemused by the conversion of Florida Gov. Charlie Crist, a former advocate of offshore oil drilling who has now changed his mind. Unmentioned by Crist or other Sunshine State politicians is that, even as Floridians fret about tar balls from the gulf spill showing up on their pristine white-sand beaches, those same beaches are going to vanish within half a century (along with much of Miami) under the worst-case scenarios presented by climate modelers. But voters can see tar balls; erosion is tougher to spot.

Congress and the Obama administration are wasting no time investigating the mining and drilling disasters. Meanwhile, a comprehensive climate bill is hopelessly stalled in the Senate, and its prospects of approval in an election year are dim. It's no more likely to progress in 2011 either, because the Democratic majority is expected to shrink.

Lawmakers today aren't seeing the forest for the trees; that will change when the forest has burned or been destroyed by bark beetles, but by then it will be too late.