

Time for some perspective on the oil spill

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Eleven people died when BP's Deepwater Horizon oil drilling platform exploded nearly two weeks ago in the Gulf of Mexico, 53 miles southwest of the Louisiana coast. It's a sad measure of how much of the subsequent commentary on this disaster has focused solely on the environmental effects, thus ignoring completely the pain and suffering of the families of the 11 who died in the fire.

The worst offshore oil disaster occurred in 1988 in the North Sea 120 miles from Aberdeen, Scotland, when a massive explosion on the Piper Alpha platform killed 167 men. For families of those killed in any drilling accident, however, the only number that counts is the one representing a father, husband or brother.

As for the environmental damage caused by Deepwater Horizon, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar deserves commendation for reminding everybody last weekend that offshore drilling is remarkably safe considering its scope and importance to the nation. There are presently more than 4,000 active rigs employing an estimated 80,000 people on the U.S. Outer Continental Shelf, with the large majority of those operating in the Gulf of Mexico. Salazar said Sunday on Fox News that more than 30,000 oil and natural gas wells have been drilled in the Gulf, and one-third of the oil and natural gas consumed by the U.S. is produced there.

This means offshore drilling is now and will remain for the foreseeable future a critically important national resource. The Interior secretary also said the industry "has been conducted in a very safe manner. Blowouts occur, but the safety mechanisms have been in place. Why this failed here is something we are investigating."

Amazingly, there have been only 41 deaths and 302 injuries in offshore platform accidents since 2001, according to federal data. Bureau of Labor Statistics data compiled by The Daily Beast reveal that offshore oil rig jobs aren't among the 10 most dangerous jobs, while fishing, sanitation work and farming are.

From an environmental perspective, offshore oil drilling is far safer than Mother Nature. As The Wall Street Journal reported, oil that seeps naturally from the ocean floor puts 47 million gallons of crude into U.S. waters annually. Thus far, Deepwater Horizon has leaked about 3 million gallons. That sounds like a lot of oil, and it is. But the Exxon Valdez leaked 11 million gallons into Alaska's Prudhoe Bay. Even those figures are dwarfed, according to The Economist, by the amount of oil spilled in man-made disasters elsewhere around the world.

Saddam Hussein's destruction of Kuwait oil facilities during the Gulf War dumped more than 500 million barrels of crude into the Arabian Gulf. The 1979 blowout of Mexico's Ixtoc 1 well resulted in 3.3 million barrels being dumped into the Gulf of Mexico.

In short, Deepwater Horizon is an environmental crisis, but not the apocalypse that alarmists claim.