Tolerance and policy on oil spills

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The spreading oil plume in the Gulf of Mexico is forcing Americans to take a closer look at the oil industry, and how it treats the environment. Members of the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors are among that group of observers.

Board members this week asked for and received an update on activities at onshore oil operations within the county. The main concern seemed to be the local industry's spotty record regarding spills and contamination.

Staff had some good news. So far this year, the spill rate is down considerably from last year.

Since the first of the year, reported spills at onshore facilities have totaled just more than 300 gallons of crude and tainted water.

During all of 2009, onshore operators spilled a total of more than 33,000 gallons of crude and produced water. That breakdown included just under 3,700 gallons of crude.

If the law of average holds, 2010 will be a significantly cleaner year than 2009 for oil released into the environment.

Unfortunately, the law of averages has little to do with the difficulties involved in extracting oil from the ground, whether it be onshore or off. A single event can have catastrophic consequences — as the world is seeing now in the Gulf of Mexico.

Still, it appears that Santa Barbara County's oil producers are making a greater effort to stop spilling their product and contaminating the environment, which could be the result of the high-risk oil operator ordinance approved by the board in 2008, provoked for the most part by chronic leaks and spills from aging equipment operated by Greka Energy.

About that old equipment: Much of the local onshore oil machinery isn't getting any newer, and the older the gear, the more likely it is that leaks, spills and contamination will occur.

That would be reason enough to support a recommendation made by one supervisor to revisit that oil-spill ordinance, and lower the threshold of allowable, unanticipated discharge.

That threshold is now set at 1,050 gallons over a year's time. What county policy makers may want to consider is a zero-tolerance ordinance, or at least one that sets off alarms after only a few gallons of oil escape.

Yet another policy shortcoming in how government agencies deal with oil producers was revealed in Senate hearings this week on the Gulf disaster.

A National Academy of Sciences report from the early 1990s shows that the oil industry fixated on passing inspections dealing with the mechanical causes of spills, but has done little to address the major factor in these incidents — human error.

Only in 2005 did federal regulators start looking into the human factor, and launched a safety program to address that issue.

But as we mentioned in a recent editorial, even that effort was thwarted by the oil industry, which wrote the rules and made the program voluntary — in large part because too many federal agencies are too friendly with big oil, and too many lawmakers rake in big campaign contributions from oil companies and their executives.

What makes this situation particularly onerous for the average American is that oil companies continue to report record profits, but apparently are unwilling to part with much of that money to install fail-safe mechanical systems, continue to tell lawmakers and regulators they can handle a worse-case scenario, then start pointing to the other guy when disaster strikes.

Meanwhile, gasoline prices are expected to drop a few pennies a gallon, a pleasant little reprieve for the pocketbook — but one that every motorist now realizes is only temporary.