

Commission Is Stumped on Future of Offshore Drilling

Siobhan Hughes, Wall Street Journal, 10-14-10

WASHINGTON—Members of President Barack Obama's commission on the Deepwater Horizon oil spill began a debate Wednesday over how to present their conclusions, and quickly bogged down on what to say about the future of offshore drilling.

The commission deliberated over draft language of its findings that said, in part, "the national interest requires the continuation and expansion of a strong offshore drilling program, but one with a better balancing of risk and with greater safety protections for human life, the environment, and the economy."

William Reilly, a co-chairman of the panel and head of the Environmental Protection Agency under President George H.W. Bush, expressed cautious support for a conclusion that endorsed continued, if closely regulated, deep-water drilling. He previously had criticized the Obama administration's ban on new deep-water drilling, a ban lifted Tuesday.

"We're headed toward a time when offshore oil will constitute the vast majority of domestic oil and gas production," he said.

But commissioner Cherry Murray, the dean of the Harvard School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, said, "The hazards of ultra deep-water need to be spelled out a little bit more."

Commissioner Frances Ulmer, the chancellor of the University of Alaska Anchorage, urged the seven-member commission to challenge the idea that "we can get to some imaginary goal of completely eliminating imports."

"If you went to all electric cars, 70% of our oil usage would go away," responded Ms. Murray.

Mr. Reilly then discussed how the media might interpret the panel's findings. "I was just thinking of a headline that says: 'Offshore drilling commission, responding to the blowout in the gulf, recommends the expansion of offshore drilling.' "

Replied Commission Frances Beinecke, president of the Natural Resources Defense Council: "Let's not do that."

Separately, Mr. Reilly defended as "high quality" papers prepared by staff investigators that criticized the Obama administration's handling of last spring's Gulf disaster. Administration officials had disputed the staff's findings that they took too long to grasp the gravity of the spill.

"Those are high-quality reports meticulously vetted for fact-based conclusions and I don't think anything I have heard would suggest the slightest alteration in any of the four of them."

The commission is expected to deliver its report to the president in January.