

Thompson's North Coast oil well ban

David Bolling, Sonoma Index-Tribune, 4-28-11

April 20 marked the first anniversary of the BP deepwater well blowout in the Gulf of Mexico, and as the Gulf Coast continues its struggle to recover ecologically and economically, we would do well to consider what a similar accident could do to the North Coast of California.

Between 1982 and 2008, there was no reason to worry that an oil well blowout could contaminate the wild, often inaccessible coast that defines so much of the character and ecology of Northern California. During that time, there was a mostly bipartisan agreement that offshore oil wells should be banned there.

But in 2008, with many members of Congress joining the chorus of "Drill baby, drill," the ban was lifted and there is now no protection in place.

We can argue endlessly about the necessity for American independence from foreign oil and the best way to achieve it. But we can't argue about the immeasurable value of the North Coast ecosystem and the catastrophic biological and economic impact an oil spill would have.

The California Current, which drives cold water from the north, and nutrient-rich upwelling along the coast, creates one of the world's most important fisheries and supports enormously valuable populations of whales, salmon and seabirds, not to mention rock fish, dungeness crabs and vulnerable populations of prized abalone. Anyone who has dived the kelp beds along the Sonoma County coastline knows immediately what an eco-horror an oil spill would mean. Cleaning up the Gulf Coast was a tedious, tenuous, time-consuming and, as yet unfinished, challenge. Cleaning large stretches of the California coast would be close to impossible.

Oil well technology will improve, thanks to federal mandates following the BP disaster. But one thing events like the Gulf spill and the Japanese earthquake-tsunami make clear is that it's almost impossible to predict and protect against all the forces of nature. Over and over again through modern history, statistically improbable and logically unlikely chains of events have converged to produce catastrophic consequences no one thought possible. And human judgment often falls short of the mark, as the utterly preventable Space Shuttle Columbia and Challenger disasters demonstrated.

It stands to reason that placing offshore oil wells in an area of high seismic activity where tectonic plates are guaranteed to shift and where destructive tsunamis have historically occurred is inviting an accident to happen. So why go there?

First District Rep. Mike Thompson re-introduced legislation in January to re-impose a ban on North Coast oil wells. It is currently parked in the Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee of the House Natural Resources Committee where it will probably languish for a long time.

That would be a shame.

As Thompson said when he introduced the bill, "It is critical that we permanently protect our coast and its vital marine life from the environmental hazards of off-shore drilling ... This legislation will steer the debate back to sensible, science based policy."

We agree and wish the Congress would too.