

By Congressman David Price -

One year ago today, our nation suffered what most consider to be the worst environmental disaster in its history when the British Petroleum (BP) Deepwater Horizon oil well exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, releasing nearly 5 million barrels of oil into the ocean and devastating the economy and ecosystems of our Gulf Coast. As we observe this somber anniversary, we must take stock of what has and has not occurred over the past year and rededicate ourselves to ensuring that we never experience such a disaster again.

On the positive side, the environmental damage appears to be far less dire than the worst predictions. However, we know that a variety of birds, fish and other sea life are struggling, and it will likely be years before we know the full extent of the damage to the Gulf Coast. Furthermore, some communities have seen a rise in health concerns that they believe are related to the spill, and there are no clear overall estimates of the total economic damages.

Unfortunately, Congress still has not changed a single law in response to this tragedy. In January 2011, the National Oil Spill Commission released 300 pages of findings and, citing "systemic" problems, made recommendations for reforms. Under Democratic leadership, last year the House approved the CLEAR Act (H.R. 3534), which included a number of the Commission's recommendations. This comprehensive response bill would: reform the scandal-ridden agency responsible for conducting oversight and collecting royalties from oil and gas companies; impose new safety measures and strengthen safety oversight; remove the \$75 million liability cap for economic damages paid by oil spillers to families and small businesses; invest in R&D on things like improving drilling, use of chemical dispersants; and restore the Gulf. Unfortunately, the bill did not receive consideration in the Senate, and the new Congress has largely ignored the Commission's report.

The Administration has begun issuing new permits with some new environmental and safety standards in place, but there is more we should do to reduce the likelihood of future spills. Our "fail safe" technology still isn't fail safe; companies can still obtain new leases – regardless of their safety record or ability to deal with an accident; the liability cap for companies is still just \$75 million; and companies can avoid compensating families when workers die on oil rigs. Now, oil companies, buoyed by Republican leaders, are rallying to get back to business as usual and are pursuing new opportunities for deepwater drilling in the Gulf, the Arctic, and elsewhere off the U.S. coast -- and they want to do so with even less environmental review. A year ago, we were discussing a comprehensive energy overhaul to transition away from fossil fuels – upon

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which our nation has been dependent for far too long – and move toward renewable energy sources. Today, we are moving backward as House Republicans push to open new areas to drilling and to further weaken offshore safety regulations.

Although much of the oil from the spill is no longer on the surface, and the story is no longer in the news, we must make good on the promises made to make the Gulf whole again. We owe it to the workers that lost their lives one year ago, to the communities that lost their livelihoods, and to the American people to pass legislation that will address the systemic failures in the oil and gas industry, increase worker safety and protection of our coasts, and hold Big Oil accountable. I will continue to closely monitor the ongoing recovery effort and to work with my colleagues to hold BP and those responsible for this tragedy accountable.

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