

Rep. Rush Holt, Senior Democrat on the Energy and Minerals Subcommittee of the House Natural Resources Committee, today delivered opening remarks at a subcommittee hearing on three Republican bills that would expand offshore oil drilling in the U.S. without improving safety or protecting the natural resources that the fishing and tourism industry rely on. “It is hard to imagine that the policy response to the Deepwater Horizon disaster that will be presented to the American people will be less rigorous oversight and regulation of offshore drilling. I cannot believe the American people would want that,” Holt said. Click the link below to read Rep. Holt’s full statement.

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Opening Statement

Ranking Member Holt

EMR Legislative Hearing on H.R. 1229, H.R. 1230, H.R. 1231

April 6, 2011

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Two weeks from today it will be one year since the worst oil-related environmental disaster in our lifetime. Fifteen people were injured and eleven workers were killed. Oil spewed from the blown-out well for 87 days, polluting the rich waters of the Gulf of Mexico and shattering the livelihoods of thousands of Americans that depend on these resources. Nearly one year after the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster, Congress has not enacted a single reform to improve the safety of offshore drilling.

I'm sure some of you would ask why we are revisiting this subject today. Chairman Hastings is a thoughtful person, but it seems that I must remind us of the events of last year because the legislation before us today must be put into perspective. Rather than having a hearing today on legislation that Ranking Member Markey and I have introduced to implement the reforms of the independent BP spill commission, the majority is holding a hearing on three bills that could potentially make offshore drilling **less** safe.

H.R. 1229 would impose artificial and arbitrary deadlines on the Department of Interior to approve permits to drill. Under this bill, after 60 days, whether or not the safety and environmental review has been completed by the Interior Department, the drilling application would be **deemed** approved. It is hard to imagine that the policy response to the Deepwater Horizon disaster that will be presented to the American people will be less rigorous oversight and regulation of offshore drilling. I cannot believe the American people would want that. And the result of the majority's legislation could be to actually hamper new permits being issued, as the Department might be forced in some instances to deny permits if the environmental review was not completed as the clock was about to run out.

This legislation also would issue a blanket extension of existing leases. In contrast to this across-the-board approach, the Department already is working, on a case-by-case basis, to extend existing leases where such action is warranted. Indeed, 5 extensions have already been issued by the Department. H.R. 1229 would give a free ride to companies even if their leases are many years from expiring, which is completely unwarranted.

H.R. 1229 also contains wholly unwarranted provisions designed to close the doors of the courthouse to plaintiffs who believe the federal government is not complying with the law. These provisions are aimed at environmental plaintiffs but will almost certainly impair the legal rights of many other potential plaintiffs.

H.R. 1230 would force the Department to rush to hold new lease sales in the Gulf of Mexico by prohibiting any further environmental review pursuant to NEPA. Somehow, the proponents of this legislation watched footage of millions of barrels of oil spilling into the Gulf and decided that a full NEPA process to try to learn from this disaster was to be avoided at all costs. By deeming pre-spill NEPA work as sufficient, this legislation would transport us back to a time when spill response plans were so sloppy they mentioned walruses in the Gulf of Mexico and blow-out preventers were believed to actually prevent blow-outs.

In addition, this legislation would force the Department to move forward with a lease sale off the coast of Virginia within 1 year. Rather than pausing after the BP spill to reevaluate whether the risks of drilling off the east coast are warranted, this legislation would require that it happen by a date certain.

Chairman Lamborn says we can drill offshore without harming fishing and tourism. I believe the residents of coastal states, including those in Central New Jersey who I know well, would disagree. H.R. 1231 would open up massive swaths of public land off the East and West Coasts to drilling. This legislation would force the Interior Department to open all of California, as well as the mid and North-Atlantic to drilling. Oil companies already are holding tens of millions of acres of public land on which they are not producing oil and thousands of leases on which they are not even exploring. But here we are considering legislation that would reward these companies by giving away nearly all of our beaches and coastal areas. It is hard to think that before we even enact legislation to improve the safety of offshore drilling, we should put more local economies, more beaches and potentially more lives at risk from another spill.

These bills were written as though the Deepwater Horizon disaster had never occurred. These bills would take us in the completely wrong direction. They could make offshore drilling less safe rather than more safe. They could endanger the lives of our workers, our economy, and our environment. Instead, this Committee and this Congress should be enacting real reforms to ensure that a similar disaster never happens again.