

The Honorable Harry Reid
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Boehner
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

July 27, 2010

Dear Majority Leader Reid, Minority Leader McConnell, Speaker Pelosi and Minority Leader Boehner:

We, the undersigned organizations, strongly urge you and your colleagues in Congress to include provisions to form a Gulf of Mexico Independent Regional Citizens' Advisory Council in oil spill response and energy legislation moving this week. Such a Council is necessary to effectively address the ongoing environmental, economic, health, and social impacts of the Deepwater Horizon drilling disaster, ensure the Gulf is protected from future accidents, and make certain that the Gulf can continue to play its vital role in meeting the energy needs of our nation.

The unprecedented release of oil into vulnerable estuaries, fisheries and communities across the Gulf of Mexico following the April 20 blowout and explosion of the BP exploration well underscores the serious environmental, economic, social and health consequences of oil and gas operations in the Gulf. To prevent future disasters, we must become more vigilant in monitoring and improving oil and gas activities in the region.

As Congress looks to improve the safety of deepwater oil exploration and oil spill response capacity in the Gulf, we urge immediate action to include citizens' active participation in ensuring the safety of their coastal communities.

After the Exxon Valdez spill, Congress moved to authorize Regional Citizens' Advisory Councils for Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet in the State of Alaska, which have over the years provided acutely needed day-to-day oversight of oil and gas transportation through key Alaska waters, as well as increased trust and communication between citizens, the oil industry, and government.

These Councils resulted in improved environmental safeguards and substantially safer and more reliable performance of oil transportation and spill response capabilities in Alaska. The work of the

Councils is by design “advisory only.” Their effectiveness, therefore, has been derived from the quality of their research, assessments and recommendations and the collective wisdom of the citizens of the region who were affected by the oil spill and would be affected should another such spill occur.

The authorization of such a regional oversight council in the Gulf is the quickest way to restore the confidence of the American people in Gulf oil and gas operations. With the collective judgment and counsel of interested stakeholders, industry and government will be able to protect the resources in the Gulf while allowing continued oil and gas exploration and other oil and gas related operations.

Under a Gulf of Mexico Independent Regional Citizens’ Advisory Council (or "GoMIRCAC"), Gulf Coast citizens with knowledge of their communities and a direct interest in promoting safer oil and gas operations --including representatives of commercial and charter fishing, the tourism industry, indigenous and socially vulnerable populations, conservationists and municipal governments – would come together as an independent voice to conduct oversight activities and thereby help ensure that both the industry and regulators perform their jobs wisely and professionally. Industry and state government officials would participate as non-voting members of the Council to help ensure that oil can be safely explored for, developed, produced and transported in the Gulf of Mexico. The Council would monitor and provide recommendations for exploration, development, production, coastal refining, and transportation of oil and gas in the Gulf of Mexico and for prevention, response and restoration measures related to the social, economic, health and environmental impacts of an incident that could result in a significant oil or gas release into the Gulf.

A citizens’ oversight panel that includes representatives from each of the five Gulf States, selected by their peers, provides a low-cost, proven pathway to oversee, monitor, mitigate and improve spill prevention and response. This will help protect the lives and livelihoods in coastal communities as well as the marine resources that are vital to the health and sustainability of the entire Gulf region.

The Gulf of Mexico is a productive but vulnerable ecosystem of national and global importance. It is home to some of our nation’s most productive fisheries and most popular tourist destinations as well as unique coastal cultures and indigenous populations who find their very way-of-life now threatened. The Gulf region is also home to a substantial amount of our nation’s domestic oil and gas reserves and production capacity. While we as a nation work to develop alternative energy sources, the Gulf Coast will continue to play a crucial role in meeting our nation’s energy needs.

Because the safety and integrity of the Gulf of Mexico’s continued oil and gas operations is vital to the security of the United States, and to the health and livelihoods of the people of the Gulf Coast, it is in the national interest to establish a Gulf of Mexico Independent Regional Citizens’ Advisory Council. Such a Council will provide more effective monitoring and oversight of the offshore and coastal energy industry operations and help ensure that they can continue in a manner that is safe for the environment and coastal communities. There is no panacea for the many adverse effects of the Deepwater Horizon incident. However, one of the closest things to a "fail safe" mechanism for the Gulf is to engage the energy, wisdom, vigilance and ingenuity of the people of the Gulf Coast states in preventing any future disasters.

We encourage you and your colleagues, as "responsible parties" on behalf of the American people, to look beyond potential opposition from industry and some in government, and place those in the Gulf first. These communities have the most to lose, and must be in a position to advise and influence whether their home becomes safe and clean once again, and free from such incidents in the future.

We have attached additional background on how to ensure a strong, independent and representative Council and implore you and your colleagues to ensure quick consideration and passage of that provision. This idea is the collective product of conversations from within the Congress itself, from those living with this spill in the Gulf, from a citizens' oversight panel established under authority of the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, and others. We believe it is the best insurance policy any of us could devise to ensure that this type of incident never happens again in the Gulf of Mexico and that exploration, development and production will be able to be carried out safely into the future. We urge Congress to prioritize the inclusion of the language authorizing this vitally important Regional Citizens' Advisory Council at once.

Sincerely

Alabama:

Action Communication and Education Reform, Inc.
Alabama Water Watch
All Churches Together (ACTII)
Community Foundation of South Alabama
Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund
Hope Haven of Hancock County Inc
Leadership Counts, Mobile, AL
Mobile Baykeeper
New Bottom Line Coalition
Operation HomeCare, Inc. - Gulf Coast Recovery Program
Portersville Revival Group
Prodigal Child Project
SmartCoast
South Alabama Center for Faith Housing
The Lighthouse Community Development Corporation
The Ordinary People Society
Tri-Coastal Community Outreach, Inc.

Florida:

Emerald Coastkeeper, Inc.
Tomorrow Matters!

Louisiana:

Alliance Institute
Bayou Blue Presbyterian Church USA
Bayou Grace Community Services
Citizens United for Economic Equity
Common Ground Health Clinic
Concerned Citizens of Agricultural Street Landfill
Episcopal Community Services of Louisiana
Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC)
Greater Light Ministries
GURLS for Life, Inc.
Institute of Women & Ethnic Studies
Interfaith Sponsoring Committee, BISCO
JEDC Housing Division Ministry
Kallisto Research Consulting

Kids Rethink New Orleans Schools
Louisiana Environmental Action Network
Louisiana Equal Voice Institute
Louisiana Justice Institute
Lower Mississippi Riverkeeper
Mary Queen of Viet Nam CDC
Mayday New Orleans (National Economic and Social Rights Initiative)
Moving Forward Gulf Coast
Neighborhoods Partnership Network
People's Environmental Center (PEC)
Rebuilding Lives Coalition
REJOICE, Inc.
Safe Streets-Strong Communities
Silent No More Ministries
SouthWings
The People's Advocate
The Renaissance Project
TRAC: Terrebonne Readiness & Assistance Coalition
Vietnamese American Young Leaders Association of New Orleans
Zion Travelers Cooperative Center

Mississippi:

ACLU-Mississippi
Asian Americans for Change
Biloxi Branch NAACP
Coastal Women for Change
Gulf Islands Conservancy
Hope Haven of Hancock County Inc.
Lutheran Episcopal Services of Mississippi
Mercy Housing & Human Development
Mississippi Coalition for Citizens with Disabilities
Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance
MS Coalition for Vietnamese American Fisherfolk and Families
North Gulfport Community Land Trust
Steps Coalition
Turkey Creek Community Initiatives

Texas:

Citizens League for Environmental Action Now
Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services

Regional/National:

Oxfam America
African Methodist Episcopal Church
Boast People SOS
Disciples Justice Action Network
Equity & Inclusion Campaign
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.
Every Church A Peace Church
Gamaliel Foundation
Government Accountability Project

Gulf Coast Civic Works Project
Gulf Restoration Network
Interfaith Worker Justice
Islamic Society of North America
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
Jewish Fund for Justice
Justice & Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ
Leadership Conference of Women Religious
Mennonite Central Committee, Washington Office
National Justice Coalition
Natural Resources Defense Council
Pax Christi USA, the national Catholic peace movement
PolicyLink
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Public Witness
Project on Government Oversight
Religious Action Center of Union of Reform Judaism
Sierra Club
Sojourners
The Episcopal Church
The Southern Energy Network
Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations
Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
US Human Rights Network

Enclosure: Draft Recommended Language for a Gulf of Mexico Regional Citizens' Advisory Council

cc: Chairman Jeff Bingaman and Ranking Member Lisa Murkowski, Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
Chairman Barbara Boxer and Ranking Member James Inhofe, Senate Environment and Public Works Committee
Chairman Maria Cantwell and Ranking Member Olympia Snowe, Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries, and Coast Guard
Chairman Henry Waxman and Ranking Member Joe Barton, House Energy and Commerce Committee
Chairman Nick J. Rahall and Ranking Member Doc Hastings, House Natural Resources Committee