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Don't drill in the Arctic

By Jonathan Henderson

I have never been to the Arctic. I was born, raised, and still live in New Orleans. I grew up swimming in the Gulf along the beaches of Florida's panhandle, fishing in the bayous of south Louisiana, and visiting family in coastal Mississippi. And I've seen firsthand the devastation that comes with offshore drilling.

Since the BP Deepwater Horizon oil disaster in 2010, I've taken countless trips by land, air and sea documenting the impacts that the oil and gas industry has had on the Gulf region. So though I've never been to the Arctic, I am uniquely qualified to deliver a message of warning about Arctic drilling on behalf of impacted communities all across the Gulf region.

Unrelated to the ongoing damages from the BP disaster, I have documented over 100 pollution incidents in the last four years, from leaking well-heads and busted pipelines on land and near-shore, to leaking drilling rigs and platforms offshore. Among them is a leaking well 11 miles off of Louisiana's coast known as the "Taylor Energy leak." The leak has been ongoing since 2004, creating a constant rainbow slick that stretches across the water for at least 10-15 miles. Nothing that the industry or government has attempted over the last 10 years has been successful in stemming the flow.

The notion that the oil industry would be able to shut off a blown-out well below the Arctic ice, when they have proven incapable of plugging the Taylor Energy leak in the relatively shallow, warm Gulf waters would be laughable, if it wasn't so serious. But the fact of the matter is that once a blowout happens, the damage is already done; I know.

There are places in the wetlands of south Louisiana still covered in BP's oil. In many locations in Louisiana's shallow salt water marshes dragging your outboard motor in the mud and sediment will release a rainbow sheen of pollution and an overwhelming stench of oil. BP's tar balls wash up on a daily basis on beaches and barrier islands along the Gulf Coast. Inland bays that were once thriving with life --birds and insects, shrimp, oysters, crabs, and even dolphins, are now nearly devoid of life. It is a tragedy what happened down here, not only to the environment but to the people who, for generations, have made their living off of the abundance of life that is now dying a slow, painful death in some areas.

In the aftermath of the disaster the oil industry and the government spoke of lessons learned and new technologies to better handle future disasters. Yet little, if any, progress has been made. The U.S. Coast Guard admits that in the event of another BP-type disaster the U.S. would have to import boom from overseas because we still do not have enough, nor does it really work that well in the first place. There are not enough skimmers on hand, much less the trained personnel to operate them. Furthermore, Congress has failed to implement any of the President's Oil Spill Commission recommendations following the BP disaster.

The new draft environmental analysis for the Arctic's Chukchi Sea predicts there is a 75 percent chance of a major oil spill if the leases lead to development. Given industry's dismal record in the more friendly waters of the Gulf, there can be no reasonable expectation that the Arctic will fare any better in the very likely event of another oil disaster. There is no effective way to clean up or contain spilled oil in Arctic conditions.

The risks of drilling in the Arctic Ocean far outweigh the potential reward. As someone who is still living with the lasting harm from offshore drilling I urge the Obama administration to exercise the precautionary principle when it comes to drilling in the Arctic. Now is the time to take protective action, not after another major oil spill; don't allow drilling in the Arctic to move forward.

Henderson manages BP drilling disaster field monitoring operations in the Gulf of Mexico for the Gulf Restoration Network.

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