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Posted on Wed, Dec. 21, 2005

# Hurricanes wreak environmental disaster, raising concerns of oil's future

BY KEVIN SPEAR

The Orlando Sentinel

**EMPIRE, La.** - Remember the Exxon Valdez?

It was the infamous supertanker that disemboweled itself on a rocky reef, spewing nearly 11 million gallons of crude oil into Alaskan waters, coating 200 miles of shoreline and killing thousands of birds and otters. Nearly 17 years later, it remains the nation's worst oil spill and a benchmark for environmental disasters.

Just months ago, oil spills on the Louisiana coast almost reached the scale of the Valdez disaster. But the spills drew little attention because they were only one piece of an even bigger story: Hurricane Katrina.

The storm smashed pipelines and tanks, unleashing at least 7 million gallons of crude; it laced valuable coastal wetlands and oiled wading birds.

"If not for the human impact of Katrina, these spills would be headline news all over the world," said Dan Walker, a scholar at the National Research Council's Ocean Studies Board.

As hurricanes are expected to bludgeon the Gulf of Mexico coast more often during the coming decades, the region's century-old oil industry is poised to expand toward the eastern part of the Gulf. Offshore rigs and oil-production platforms may soon dot the waters off Florida. And once the oil starts flowing, development of petroleum-handling facilities in the state may seem like a logical next step.

Hurricane Katrina was a crucial test for how the industry manages disaster.

In a way, a lot went right. Though most of the spills came from pipes and tanks on Louisiana's shore, federal authorities said none of thousands of undersea wells below the Gulf floor leaked significantly.

It was a triumph for a business eager to prove its trustworthiness and win leverage as it seeks approval to drill in the mostly unprobed petroleum deposits along Florida's coast.

Congress and Florida have not resolved key issues, including when drilling might occur, or where rigs and platforms will anchor - if just out of sight or more than 100 miles from beaches. Nobody can predict whether there will be dozens or thousands of

platforms or whether shoreline oil facilities will be permitted.

But there is unrelenting pressure to drill in Florida waters, and that's why what went wrong during hurricanes Katrina and Rita and other recent storms are now lessons for Florida.

Katrina and Rita visited the worst-ever destruction on the Gulf of Mexico oil-production industry and the Louisiana coast. As a result, officials are moving with even more vigor to improve rig and platform designs and their anchors and to better shield platform pipelines from storms.

"In reality, I think our record is pretty stellar, considering the forces of Mother Nature," said David Mica, executive director of the Florida Petroleum Council, a division of the American Petroleum Institute. "We've got to do even better, and I think we will."

There has been enough destruction during recent storms to keep critics worried.

"The fact that rigs were lifted off their anchors and moved in some cases dozens and dozens of miles shows the potential for catastrophe," said Mark Ferrulo, director of the anti-drilling Florida Public Interest Research Group.

Last year, the oil industry learned much about what a storm can do to drilling rigs, which bore holes into the seafloor and dip into crude briefly before permanent platforms are set up.

During Hurricane Ivan, a Transocean Inc. drilling rig rampaged more than 70 miles toward Florida before the storm subsided and a crew was able to get aboard and bring it under control.

Early in this year's hurricane season, federal regulators warned owners of the 134 drilling rigs in the Gulf that "rigs adrift are not acceptable!"

Yet Katrina and Rita set off stampedes of the steel behemoths, some as big as beachside condos.

A Transocean rig romped for 80 miles. A Diamond Offshore Drilling Inc. rig beached at Dauphin Island, Ala. All told, drilling rigs were adrift 19 times.

The storms also destroyed or badly damaged 161 of 4,000 production platforms - stations affixed to about 8,000 undersea wells.

Safety valves under the seafloor stopped oil from escaping. But even the most advanced platform designs - what the oil industry promises to use near Florida - succumbed to nature's fury.

The platform Mars, 130 miles southeast of New Orleans, is a brute among offshore structures - at 70 million pounds, more than twice as tall as the Empire State Building and girded for 140-mph winds. Then came its match - Katrina.

Mars' 16 prodigious wells, pulsing with enough crude to fill 500 backyard pools daily, remained secure thanks to shutoff valves. But the storm crippled the platform, smacking its towering derrick overboard and badly damaging other major components.

Even when valves stop undersea wells from leaking, rigs and platforms still have oil storage tanks aboard that can be damaged and spill crude.

Officials haven't determined how much oil may have leaked from those rigs and platforms. Satellite photos found widespread slicks in the Gulf near Louisiana soon after Katrina, but the oil dissipated before cleanup crews could arrive.

Oil companies admit that, despite their pledges to build rigs that withstand wind and waves, there is no way to eliminate all risk of spills. Just in the past few years, hurricanes have proved that point.

After Hurricane Lili in 2002, a Murphy Oil Corp. platform spewed nearly 15,000 gallons of orange-hued crude over four days, forming a 6-mile slick in the Gulf of Mexico south of Louisiana. Less than half was mopped up.

During Hurricane Ivan last year, a Taylor Energy Co. platform sank 19 miles from the Louisiana coast, dumping 17,000 gallons of crude, 2,300 gallons of diesel, 1,000 gallons of jet fuel, 880 gallons of machinery oils, 546 gallons of acid and 3,260 gallons of other chemicals.

In June, an Amerada Hess Corp. rig evacuated for the relatively mild Tropical Storm Arlene lost 560 gallons of crude. The oil killed nearly 700 brown pelicans in Breton National Wildlife Refuge just off the Louisiana coast.

What has happened offshore, however, pales compared with the spills along coastal Louisiana.

The spilled crude came from broken pipes. Crude-storage tanks peeled apart and were so storm-scoured there was little oily sheen left in sight. Other large tanks were cracked open by flooding.

In all, oil spilled from at least 143 sites.

Some of the plumbing is decades old and may have been weakened by age. But state officials also are looking at whether the region's chronic erosion of wetlands, long valued as a buffer to storms, could have left tanks and pipes more vulnerable to waves and wind.

Still in harm's way along coastal Louisiana are thousands of tanks and enough pipeline to wrap around the world. The tanks vary from bus-sized to several stories tall and temporarily hold crude oil gathered by pipelines from offshore platforms. The oil eventually is transferred by barge or by more pipeline to some of the 17 refineries in Louisiana or other plants along the Gulf Coast.

One marsh was so heavily oiled that the best cleanup method was to ignite it, with the hope that once the roiling pall of greasy smoke died down, plant roots would survive and grow into new marsh.

In other areas, the work was tedious, requiring crews to hack into swamp forests. Oil-field welder Wayne Paolini, 48, who lives in the area, saw workers sponging patches of ground and leaves of marsh vegetation.

"They were out there with what I call 'diapers' soaking it up," he said.

The Coast Guard said 3 million gallons were pumped out, wiped up or burned. The rest evaporated - joining the world's cloud of air pollution - or was dispersed, meaning it was blasted into tiny particles and spread too far and thinly into wetlands to clean up.

Scientists worry that the wetland ecosystem may not show all ill effects of the petroleum bath for years to come.

Oil-industry defenders blame Mother Nature for unavoidable damage to oil equipment, but some think the industry shares blame.

"They knew everything about the possibility of an environmental disaster," said Louisiana resident Jerome Ringo, a former oil worker and now chairman of the National Wildlife Federation. "These people aren't stupid. Did they take the proper steps to address it? No."

New Orleans attorney Val P. Exnicios has sued oil companies, accusing them of not being better prepared for storms.

Though the industry calls hurricane damage an "act of God," oil companies should have taken steps such as bolting down tanks to prevent them from floating away and spilling crude, he said.

"They were, I assume, relying on the weight of the oil in the tank to hold them down," Exnicios said. "But oil is lighter than

water."

It's a fact that is symbolic of the Gulf's future: Storms may continue to be more powerful than whatever the oil industry builds.

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