

Spill Baby Spill! Fossil Fuels and the Abuse of Power by Andrew Willner

The BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill that killed 11 and threatens to annihilate the coastal economy of the southeastern U.S. is a good reason to question authority.

It has caused me to abandon my faith in our government's ability to regulate big oil and lead us to an alternative energy future. I've been disheartened by the web of legislative loopholes and industry deregulation which has opened the door to potentially criminal negligence by the oil industry.

As oil continues to hemorrhage into the Gulf, it is now up to individuals, grassroots organizations and communities to demand that the U.S. government criminally prosecute those responsible for this disaster and amend the policies that have resulted in unregulated, out of control coastal drilling. It's also time to make this a major pocketbook issue, a moment when all of us should divest ourselves of oil stocks.

Let's be clear, BP and other companies drilling in the Gulf (and determined to drill on all of our coasts), are not drilling because it will add a few months of fuel to our current supply, but for the bloated profits those companies will earn – a significant amount of which end up in the election coffers of both parties.

Yes, it's been a great time for the oil companies. BP alone made almost \$6 billion in profits in the first quarter of this year. And to protect those profits, BP spent \$16 million in 2009 to influence Capitol Hill lawmakers on both sides of the aisle, says Newsweek.

But now the Gulf disaster has ripped the filthy bandage off the festering wound of our oil-based economy, exposing it for what it truly is – bullying by a corrupt industry. This spill was easily preventable had government done its job, and had BP been a responsible company and put reasonable safeguards in place, such as a \$500,000 emergency remote-control shutoff switch that two other oil producing nations, Norway and Brazil, require, says *The Wall Street Journal*. Instead, BP cut corners to save a buck, and is now doing senseless violence to the environment, our economy, and life on the battered Gulf coast.

It is now up to ordinary people to do what government has failed to do – to stand up to the bullies at BP and other fossil fuel companies and demand they be deprived of their privileged place at the bargaining table, and be stripped of the billions in subsidies and tax relief that keeps the playing field tilted precipitously against alternative energy. Instead of subsidizing oil production, we should tax every barrel to recoup the costs of stationing U.S. troops on foreign soil to protect private oil derricks, pipelines and tankers.

It is also time for people to work locally to transition our towns, cities, counties and states away from an oil-based economy to a “restorative economy,” an economy dedicated to core values of human and environmental health and safety, cultural and biological diversity, and care for commonly held natural resources.

A restorative economy embraces alternative locally based energy, is less extractive and less violent. One need only look at the utter lack of danger presented by a wind farm or solar array, compared to the horrific events in the Gulf, to see the difference.

As importantly, we must place blame for this disaster squarely on the shoulders of big oil. It is not enough to parade the BP board of directors through a congressional hearing. As an environmental activist who has gathered the corpses of oiled birds, and seen firsthand ecosystems wrecked by oil company negligence, I wonder if it's high time we paraded those executives in a "perp walk" before the blinding lights of TV news cameras.

We must put our elected and appointed officials on notice that this is the beginning of the end for fossil fuels. It is time we rejected the morally bankrupt arguments of an industry that is destroying not only our environmental and economic future, but the democratic process.

Vote with your wallet and purse. Sell mutual funds that include fossil fuel securities. Tell charitable foundations, your churches, and higher education institutions to divest portfolios of oil stocks. Invest in alternative energy companies instead. This amounts to an investment in yourself, your community, the environment, and your children's future.

© 2010 BlueRidgePress.com. Andrew Willner has been a city planner, furniture designer, sculptor, boat builder, environmentalist, storyteller, and photographer. He was Executive Director and Baykeeper at NY/NJ Baykeeper for nineteen years, retiring in 2008.