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Opening Statement
Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, Ranking Member

Hearing on "Making the Gulf Coast Whole Again: Assessing the Recovery Efforts of BP and the Obama Administration after the Oil Spill"

June 2, 2011

Good morning. Let me first welcome Governor Barbour. Thank you very much for being here today, Governor. Your state has been through a tremendous amount, and I sincerely look forward to your testimony today. Let me also welcome Michael Bromwich from the Department of the Interior. You agreed to be here today with incredibly short notice, so thank you very much for your testimony and your expertise. Finally, let me welcome the residents of the Gulf who have traveled here today to share their views with the Committee.

Earlier this year, the bipartisan National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill issued a comprehensive report on the causes of the spill. The report said this:

"[T]he accident of April 20 was avoidable. It resulted from clear mistakes made in the first instance by BP, Halliburton, and Transocean, and by government officials who, relying too much on industry's assertions of the safety of their operations, failed to create and apply a program of regulatory oversight that would have properly minimized the risks of deepwater drilling."

These were extremely difficult lessons to learn. But I am encouraged that now, more than a year later, officials in both the oil industry and our government appear to be heeding these lessons and retooling the way they do business.

First, we must never forget that 11 individuals lost their lives in the explosion on April 20. To address deficiencies that contributed to these deaths, the Interior Department issued an improved Workplace Safety Rule that many, including industry, believe will significantly enhance worker safety.

The Department also completely reorganized the Minerals Management Service. MMS had been criticized because it oversaw the safety of drilling, the environmental impacts caused by drilling, and the revenue generated from drilling. According to the National Commission, MMS had a "built-in incentive to promote offshore drilling in sharp tension with its mandate to ensure safe drilling and environmental protection."

The Department also implemented a number of critical safety measures to ensure that a blowout like this would never happen again. For example, a new Drilling Safety Rule strengthened standards for well control procedures, drilling equipment, and well design, and it required independent third-party inspections.

Finally, the Department issued a “notice to lessees” that required oil companies to demonstrate that they could actually cap a well and handle a deepwater blowout before any new drilling permits were issued. These were responsible steps taken after it became clear to the nation, after 87 days, that BP simply did not have this technology available.

Mr. Chairman, I have to say that I am disappointed by your actions today. You stated that Committee investigators have interviewed more than 50 government officials, scores of residents, business owners, and whistleblowers as part of this investigation. That is news to everyone on this side of the aisle because you completely excluded us from your effort. And you have not explained why. Unfortunately, this is the definition of partisanship, and it undermines the integrity of this Committee.

Nevertheless, moving forward, it is our obligation as Members of Congress to develop constructive ways to help people in the Gulf rebuild their lives and their livelihoods. In my former capacity as Chairman of the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation, I visited the Gulf twice while oil was flowing from the Macondo well. I saw firsthand how this spill affected small businesses that rely on tourism, fishing, and other industries that were decimated by the spill.

I have offered several measures to provide real solutions to Gulf residents. Last Congress, I authored a provision in legislation to cut in half—from 90 days to 45 days—the amount of time responsible parties had to settle claims arising from the spill. I also worked on provisions with Chairman Oberstar to strengthen the Coast Guard’s oversight of oil spill response plans.

This year, I offered an amendment to H.R. 1229 to require all oil and gas exploration, development, and production activities in the Gulf to be conducted by U.S.-flagged vessels, which would have immediately stimulated the Gulf economy. Unfortunately, the Rules Committee did not allow a vote on my amendment.

My basic point is that we have a tremendous opportunity in this Committee to really help people who have undergone extreme hardship. As a goal for today’s hearing, if we can focus our efforts on identifying even one positive, proactive solution that we can all agree on, then I think today’s hearing will be a success.

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