

Feb 18, 2013, WTE Column. Editor's Headline: "Wyoming next on BP radar"

"Wamsutter: Home to BP's largest onshore gas field in America," reads an I-80 billboard near Cheyenne. Now British Petroleum has set its sights on something so big, it makes Wamsutter seem God's little acre. According to the Wyoming Outdoor Council, the Continental Divide-Creston (CD-C) project will be "one of the largest on the planet."

The bad news: the project seems a done deal. The Outdoor Council has folded its cards. The good news: the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is open to public comment until March six. By the time you finish reading this, I hope to have convinced you that every man, woman, and child in your neighborhood—and beyond—needs to raise a hue and cry against this insanity.

First, the background. "BP's largest onshore . . ." brings to mind, of course, "offshore" and with it, the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster off the southern coast of the United States. Eleven workers burned to death or drowned; another 17 were seriously injured. Its lasting legacy: The decimated marine life and shorebird populations, the disturbed beaches in Florida, Louisiana, and Alabama, the annihilated fisheries.

Carl Safina's 2011 "A sea in Flames" examines the wide-spread negligence, irresponsible cost-cutting, and plain complacency of British Petroleum's operations up to the April 20, 2010, catastrophe and after. The author was present during much of the eighty-six days of spewing oil, which polluted the gulf with an estimated 4.9 million barrels. He breaks down the figure to make comprehensible the scope of devastation: "99,700 gallons per hour or 1,662 gallons per minute, about 30 gallons per second. Roughly 25 gallons each and every time your heart sent a pulse of blood up your aorta, for nearly three months."

"A Sea in Flames" incorporates photos of residents' reactions: A Grand Isle, Louisiana, lawn featuring a fleet of small white crosses mourning "Red Snapper," "Summer Fun," "Beach Sunrise," "Shrimp Gumbo" and numerous other calamities. Another resident put a toilet on his lawn and affixed to it a sign that reads "BP Headquarters." Yet another planted the poster of a Grim Reaper whose cape reads "BP," headed by the legend, "You killed our gulf . . . our way of life!"

Safina's glum prediction? "There will be a next time."

Will that next time be in Wyoming? The book's déjà vu section lists a number of onshore and offshore horrors not limited to BP events, yet British Petroleum is cited in 7 of 24 events as follows:

March 23, 2005: An explosion at BP's Texas refinery, found to be due to "willful negligence," kills 15 people. Years later, it paid huge workplace-safety fines; sadly, these "represent less than 2 percent of BP's \$6 billion profits for the first three months of 2010." What of the widows and orphans left in the wake of the killings?

2005: Great Britain's Health and Safety Executive issues a warning concerning a BP rig in the North Sea. The warning includes an accusation of "bullying and intimidating its North Sea staff."

2006: BP spills 200,000 gallons of oil in Prudhoe Bay. Corrosion in poorly maintained equipment is found to be the cause. BP pays a fine.

November 2009. A BP pipeline ruptures in Alaska, releasing about 46,000 gallons of oily gunk into the tundra.

January 2010: A letter to the president of BP Exploration (Alaska) from Congress members Henry Waxman and Bart Stupak speaks of "a number of personnel incidents involving serious injury or death" and takes issue with BP's proposed budget cuts that "might threaten the company's ability to maintain safe operations."

April 14-15, 2010: BP gains approval of a series of permit changes to speed up drilling on the Deepwater Horizon platform. BP has already secured a "categorical exclusion" from environmental review.

2010: Another BP platform, Atlantis, has been operating with major safety violations. An employee who called attention to these was laid off and is suing. "Safety doesn't seem to matter," states the man. "When you complain of a problem and try to fix it, you're pushed aside." Already in 2008 a manager emailed a warning of "potentially catastrophic operator errors," stating that, "hundreds if not thousands of critical engineering drawings for its operation were never finalized." When fully operational, Atlantis pumps an estimated 800,000 barrels—not gallons, barrels—per day. Comments the laid-off employee: "If something happens there, it will make Deepwater Horizon look like a bubble."

The author labels these instances "but a few" of disasters brought on mostly by mismanagement. He doesn't even mention the lawsuit BP shareholders filed against the megacorporation, tossed out of court on a technicality. So far BP has taken pretax charges totaling \$42.2 billion for the Gulf of Mexico oil spill. The Wall Street Journal of February 5, 2013, quotes the London-based oil-and-gas company as saying its replacement-cost profit "was \$2.14 billion in the three months ended Dec. 31, compared with \$7.61 billion in the fourth quarter of 2011." It's business as usual.

Wyoming has had its "onshore" disasters and blowouts. When gas well Crosby 25-3 exploded in Clark in 2006, the industry termed it a "once-in-a-million" event. Six years later, another gas well blew out, this time near Douglas, causing renewed evacuations, health hazards, and contaminations. The state continues to ignore the fallout while industry shrugs off any and all responsibility to address stricken residents' health problems, water contamination, and land devaluation. Compared with what's in store, however, these instances may someday appear quaint.

What's in store is this: British Petroleum wants a gas field the size of Rhode Island. The

CD-C involves a mammoth, 9,000-well natural gas-drilling project. If approved, it will become one of the largest single natural-gas field developments in the United States, covering more than one million acres.

The natural-gas industry bills itself as clean and green; in actual fact, its practices and products are far from it. Ask the Clark and Douglas evacuees about their clean and green neighbors—to say nothing of residents in Pennsylvania and elsewhere badly affected by gas drilling, as illustrated in the film “Gasland.” Or, for that matter, the polluted water wells of Pavillion, Wyo., where the industry still contests EPA findings.

Meanwhile, the industry actively lobbies against any kind of renewable-energy use or expansion. Last year it succeeded in choking off funding to implement Section 433, the green-building requirement of the Energy Independence and Security Act, which mandates that all federal buildings—502,000 of them—be retrofitted to become carbon neutral by 2030. Is such lobbying the industry’s idea of “clean and green”?

Here now BLM’s description of CD-C: “The project is located on 1.1 million acres in the checkerboard pattern of mixed land ownership comprised of 59 percent federal, 37 percent private and 4 percent state-owned land. The eastern boundary of the project is approximately 25 miles west of Rawlins, Wyo. with the western boundary approximately 50 miles east of the city of Rock Springs.”

Note the 37 percent private landowners. How will these residents be affected by gas drilling next door? In the manner of the Clark and Douglas evacuees?

The BLM must be prevailed upon to require “careful, effective, environmentally protective measures as conditions to the development in order to protect residents, workers, air quality, and remaining wildlife habitats,” urges the WY Outdoor Council’s website. Readers are asked to petition BLM to “provide enhanced protection for these contiguous areas of public lands.”

The Outdoor Council seems to straddle both sides of the fence, merely suggesting we plead for a modicum of protection. All the same, it notes that BLM’s ability to protect the environment is reduced “because of the intervening privately owned sections of land.”

Whatever makes the Outdoor Council think BP will have a change of heart just because its current focus is on gas rather than petroleum extraction?

Multinationals like BP know only one motive, and it is profit-driven. The suffering of residents, the worker injuries and deaths, are but collateral damage; the fines assessed, mere dirt under the fingernails. The environment? Why, that’s the domain of tree huggers and smelly, sandal-clad Occupy Wall Street types.

Wyoming has one of the worst worker-safety records in the nation. It is also the state with the highest per capita suicide rate. Do we wish to add to the statistics? Do we desire to further BP’s ambition to maximize profits?

Until March 6, 2013, comments may be emailed to:
Continental_Divide_Creston_WYMail@blm.gov, faxed to 307-328-4224, or mailed to
the Bureau of Land Management, Rawlins Field Office, P.O. Box 2407, Rawlins, WY
82301. For telephone inquiries, Mark Ames can be reached at 307-328-4294.

□□□