

## Day 57 – And Still No End In Sight

### A recap of the Gulf Oil Spill Community Forum – “From Crisis to Solutions”

by Erin Kane, HRP Associates, Inc. June 17, 2010

They were students, teachers, business owners, civic leaders and media hounds. They were democrats, republicans, libertarians and independents. Their views were wide-ranging and their outlooks varied, but they all came together on the night of June 15<sup>th</sup> at the Palladium Theater in St. Petersburg, as citizens to seek answers and solutions to the tragedy that has struck the Gulf Coast and has affected the lives of countless Americans, marine animals and the economies of the Gulf States, already fragile under the pressure of a nationwide recession.

The Palladium was filled to its capacity of approximately 900, with additional spectators standing along the sides and rear of the auditorium. The evening began with Panel One (“About the Oil Spill”), which included five speakers who discussed the status of the spill, and theories regarding causation and responsibility.



Dr. Chuanmin Hu, Associate Professor at USF, began the discussion with a short timeline of events and spill tracking methodologies. He reported that oil has already entered the loop current, but that the exact origin of this material is presently unknown. The loop current spins clockwise and would carry the oil around the keys to southeastern Florida. The amount of oil in the loop current and its predicted effect on these coastlines is not presently known. Dr. Hu also indicated that a major slick is only five miles off the coast of Cuba, and depending on wind directions could make landfall any day. Dr. Hu assured the audience that based on computer modeling techniques and satellite imagery, that western Florida coast is safe, at least for the short term. A spectator noted that we are approaching hurricane season and Dr. Hu responded that any hurricane activity would quickly change that prediction, with unforeseen consequences.



Dan Berard, Geophysical Engineer and retired Exxon Executive spoke after Hu. Based on his years of experience in the oil and gas industry, Berard reported that many factors contributed to the failure of the Deepwater Horizon well. He noted that it is crucial to understand the series of events to ensure that it never happens again. These factors included the use of a Transocean blow out preventer (BOP) with a documented history of poor performance, Haliburton's failure to follow standard protocol by testing the cement linings that they installed at depth, and the use of four motors instead of the recommended 20 to stabilize the Discovery ship, in an effort to cut costs. Furthermore, Berard noted that if an acoustical BOP had been used, then a remote signal could have been sent to Deepwater Horizon, likely preventing this disaster from ever occurring. "Unfortunately or fortunately", Berard uttered, "What BP has here is a Saudi Class well".

## DAY 57 continued

Laurie MacDonald, Program Director of Defenders of Wildlife St. Pete spoke next about the effects on wildlife and endemic species, and D.T. Minich, Executive Director of Visit St.Pete/Clearwater, told the audience that an alarming decline in vacation bookings to the Gulf Coast has already occurred. According to Minich, his organization is working with individuals that were involved in the same industry following the Alaska-Valdez spill, to come up with strategies to promote the Gulf Coast and counteract the negative publicity that has already started to impact tourism. Bill Hogarth, Dean at the College of Marine Sciences at USF closed the panel, noting that this isn't the first time a major oil spill has occurred, and that if we come together with all of our resources, it is within our power to clean this spill up quickly.

Panel Two, "The Media's Perspective" began promptly at 7 pm and was moderated by Ernest Hooper of the St. Petersburg Times. Preston Rudie of WTSP-TV spoke first, commenting on the media's role. He noted that reporters and other members of the news media must be thoughtful when presenting information, taking care to be accurate and to present information in such a way as to prevent misconceptions. Rob Lorei of WMNF Radio and WEDU-TV followed, and summarized what he feels is a general desire among the American people, to understand who exactly is in charge of the cleanup efforts, the US Government or BP? Lorei noted that toxic dispersants that know carcinogenic effects are being spread over the oil, in an effort to conceal the oil. What are the effects of such material, Lorei wondered? Why aren't non-toxic methods of remediation being explored?

Ernest Hooper then turned to panelist John Hill of the St. Petersburg Times and asked "Is this Obama's Katrina" Hill responded, "No," noting that Katrina was something that happened in an instant and recovery could begin quickly, unlike the oil spill, which continues to gush at unprecedented rates, with recovery presently a distant glimmer somewhere in the murky future. If we can draw any parallel, Hill noted, it's in our apparent lack of investment in cities and the failure of a regulatory structure to respond to such an event. Mitch Perry of Creative Loafing chimed in, "We live in a short attention span society," and remarked that one gaping shortcoming that has become evident during this event is the lack of leadership both by Governor Crist, and the Federal Government. He cited President Carter's 1979 speech regarding the United States Energy Policy. In that speech it was Carter's promise to wean the US off of foreign oil, and to generate 20% of America's power from solar sources by the year 2000. According to the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), solar accounted for less than 0.1% of the country's electricity generation in 2006. A cry rose from the audience, "Nothing has changed!!!" Jan Hollingsworth, Independent Environmental Reporter and Editor closed the panel with a heartfelt discussion regarding the downfall of journalism and the press's inability to cover this story properly. She reminded the audience, "You cannot give equal weight to the truth and a lie". Applause rained through the auditorium and all agreed that all too often we unhesitatingly believe what we hear without questioning the source. "You must go out and find the truth," stated Hollingsworth.



At 8:00 pm, President Barack Obama's Oval Office address was broadcast live, and all watched and listened as the President made a the promise to the Gulf States for a full restoration of the economy and environment. As he outlined the events of the past 57 days, much of what we heard was reminiscent of the discussions taking place just moments earlier. Obama ended with a push for clean energy, and promised to set standards and provide incentives for achieving these goals.

Time will tell. As Carter had similarly hoped to end our independence on foreign oil and establish attainable goals for clean and renewable energy over 30 years ago, words often speak loudly enough to mask the obstacles that prevent these actions from being accomplished. As the evening came to a close with Panel 3, "Solutions" panelists Cynthia Sarthou of the Gulf Restoration Network, Susan Glickman of the Florida Business Network for a Clean Energy Economy, David Friedman of the Union of Concerned Scientists and David Pettit, an attorney with Natural Resources Defense Council discussed the future of oil, alternatives for Clean Energy, and the overwhelming need for drastic legislative reform.

All present were energized and eager to provide support, advocate change, and to play a role in the clean up efforts. Despite differing alliances and platforms, everyone in attendance agreed, the restoration efforts that are underway may not be completed for 20 years or longer. Here in western Florida, we will hope and pray that our coasts are spared, that our nation has the courage to do what is right, and that we have the tenacity to help one another move through and beyond this tragedy. Most of all, we hope that it never happens again.

Additional information as well as Audience Questions and Answers will be posted in the coming weeks at <http://www.floridacleanenergy.biz/>