

By REP. MIKE HONDA & FABIEN COUSTEAU ([Originally published in Politico](#))

In 10 years, when we look back on the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, hopefully we can note that 2010 is when it all changed — when American policymakers and people finally figured it out.

With an estimated 500,000 to 800,000 gallons of oil spewing daily, devastating the Gulf's ecosystem and its marine mammals, sea birds, fish, shellfish and sea life stocks for generations to come, we have ample reason to radically transform the way we use energy and environmental resources.

Consider that 18 million to 29 million gallons of oil have emptied into the Gulf since April 20 compared with Exxon Valdez's Alaska spill of 11 million gallons. This is the worst single-incident environmental disaster in history.

Will we learn from it?

We did not learn much from Exxon Valdez. In fact, the Supreme Court ruled in 2008 that Exxon had to pay only a fraction of its fines to cover its rehabilitation and restoration responsibilities in Alaska.

The same may happen with BP unless we ramp up the urgency and impress upon the public and policymakers three key reasons why we should dramatically change course.

The first is basic safety. Forget for a moment the drilling site/station safety regulations issues. While important, these issues miss a bigger safety question: Why do we continue to rely so much on sources of energy — oil and gas (the two fossil fuels implicated in the BP spill) or coal (let us not forget recent mining tragedies) — that place Americans directly in harm's way?

Yet we do, despite the high risks associated with our energy usage.

For example, we continue to depend on oil and gas imports from countries that are politically isolated from and by the United States — making our energy supplies vulnerable, volatile and subject to the whim of geopolitical machinations.

We also depend on energy whose effluents, emissions and exhausts — produced in the extraction, refinement and consumption phases — contribute to increasing cancer rates, chronic illnesses and other disabilities.

The BP spill exemplifies the adverse effects of our high-risk dependency, and we might as well have hammered a nail in the Gulf's coffin — sealing off its ability to produce healthy sea life indefinitely.

Second, is financial security. Consider the exorbitant costs of maintaining and managing our oil, gas and coal energy needs — from the hundreds of millions of dollars that the U.S. government and BP will ultimately pay for cleanup and restoration in the Gulf, to the hundreds of billions of dollars that the U.S. government continues to spend in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Imagine how this money could be spent in America, providing jobs in wind turbine and solar panel construction, new energy grid construction and the development of alternative fuels for transportation.

This is hardly a fiscally defensible *modus operandi*, especially when our country is cautiously emerging from a recession. Throwing hundreds of millions of dollars at an energy supply that is making us more vulnerable and dependent every day is financially irresponsible.

Third, is stewardship. Consider that our three primary energy sources — oil, gas and coal — are among the most environmentally destructive, leaving a poisonous footprint for future generations.

Why continue an environmentally unsustainable practice when there are cleaner and greener options?

We are killing our country's fish stocks, poisoning our water supplies with our coal mining techniques and making our air less breathable.

The water, the air and the land won't repair themselves anytime soon. We must foster advocacy, conservation and restoration of our natural world in every decision going forward.

What is needed immediately, however — before another 20-plus million gallons spill into the Gulf — is a radical rethinking of our energy supply.

If we fail this moment, we will fail in providing our country with the most basic health, financial and environmental safeguards.

The time to act is now.

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