Offshore Drilling

Is tougher federal oversight needed?

By Thomas J. Billitieri

Introduction

The blowout two months ago at the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico has turned into one of the worst environmental catastrophes in U.S. history. Well owner BP failed in repeated attempts to stop the underwater gusher spilling millions of gallons, and experts say it may be months before it is brought under control. The blowout has exposed corner-cutting by BP and massive regulatory failures at the Minerals Management Service, the nation's 4,000 offshore drilling field.

Ideological differences over how to balance environmental and economic interests have defined the Obama presidency. The legacy of George W. Bush, for example, is the Prelude deepwater oil field, with temperature monitors inside the tanks to control the pressure of the crude liquid. In the pre-Bush era, the tanks were designed to withstand an explosion, not an earthquake. The Bush administration was focused on expanding drilling, with less concern for safety.

Overview

On April 20, BP managers were on board the Deepwater Horizon oil rig, some 50 miles out in the Gulf of Mexico, to mark the big floating rig's safety record. But the celebration was short-lived. At 9:56 p.m., a giant

Fire boats try to save the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico on April 21, 2010, a day after a blowout and explosion killed 11 workers. The $550 million floating platform sank on April 22. The resulting oil spill is considered among the worst environmental disasters in U.S. history. (Getty Images/U.S. Coast Guard)