



Remarks by Geoff Morrell at the Society of Environmental Journalists Conference

Speaker: **Geoff Morrell**

Title: **senior vice president, US communications and external affairs**

Speech date: **3 September 2014**

Venue: **New Orleans, Louisiana**

Thank you for that introduction. And thanks to the Society of Environmental Journalists for inviting me here tonight.

It's a privilege to speak to this organization and participate in this year's conference.

I especially want to thank the conference chairman, Mark Schleifstein. I also want to congratulate you, Mark, because I know this year marks your 30th anniversary at the Times-Picayune. I hope you continue to be the standard-bearer for tough but fair environmental journalism for many years to come.

Of course, it's not just Mark. You all fulfill a vital role in our society: delivering environmental news to the world on a daily basis. And your work is really critical right now.

So many of the debates playing out today focus on questions that you wrestle with:

- How to meet the planet's growing demand for energy – set to rise by 40% over the next 20 years – while at the same time protecting our natural resources;
- What role technology and innovation play in addressing our energy and environmental goals; and,
- What sorts of government policies are needed to help us achieve them.

And yet you're doing this work at an extraordinarily challenging time for journalism. Having been a reporter myself for 15 years – although I've been out of the game for more than seven years now – I think I understand many of the difficulties you face.

However, for the next few days, I hope you have a chance to take a break from the crush of deadlines and the demand for click-worthy stories so you can fully explore the theme of this conference: "risk and resilience."

It's especially relevant, given that one of the topics on the agenda is the impact of the Deepwater Horizon accident.

Many of you reported on the spill when it first happened – and in the months that followed – but what's happened in the years since, in my opinion, has been under-reported.

As a result, too few people realize that the Gulf has shown remarkable resilience, defying dire predictions made at the time of the accident.

Tonight, I'd like to focus my remarks on that, with the benefit now of four years of environmental data, including literally hundreds of studies conducted as part of the Natural Resource Damage Assessment or "NRDA."

As many of you know, this is the process through which the U.S. government, state agencies and BP conduct studies to identify what harm has been done to natural resources, the best way of restoring those resources, and the amount of money required to do so.



The Deepwater Horizon NRDA is the most extensive and expensive environmental assessment ever conducted, spanning four years so far and costing BP a billion dollars and counting. While the assessment is not yet complete, we have committed another billion dollars to early restoration projects. It's unprecedented to begin that work before the scientists have completed theirs.

But I'm getting a bit ahead of myself. To figure out how so many predictions ended up being so wrong, we really need to go back to April 2010 and recall the sense of alarm and fear – totally understandable in the moment with a “spill cam” on the wellhead 24/7, and experts from BP, government, and industry working ‘round the clock to cap the well and stop the flow of oil.

You know all this better than I do. You were covering it. I wasn't. But the story even reached the Pentagon briefing room. I remember the Secretary of Defense telling me to go in there and push back on calls for the DOD to take over the response. At one point, I had to kill the absurd suggestion that the military detonate a small nuclear device to shut in the well.

It was in that atmosphere that many predicted the accident would have severe and long-lasting consequences... not only for the Gulf... but also for areas far beyond it.

For example, several experts predicted oil would enter the so-called “loop current” and reach Florida's Atlantic coast within weeks.

CNN reported that “there will be tar balls all the way up the East Coast, all the way to Europe.”

Advocacy groups predicted the spill could have “generational” impacts on Gulf shrimp and, quote, “strikeout” Louisiana's state bird, the brown pelican.

Another predicted Gulf Coast tourism could suffer “up to \$23 billion of losses” and take years to recover from the accident.

CBS News asserted that “ten years from now... there will very likely still be seafood... contaminated with oil.” The network suggested that “this could mean a permanent end” to the Gulf's seafood industry.

Make no mistake: The accident was a tragedy. Eleven people lost their lives. Birds, fish and other wildlife perished. But it's also clear – almost four-and-a-half years later – that the apocalyptic forecasts of the death of the Gulf, the coastal economy, indeed, the unique way of life here – did not come to pass.

The oil didn't make it to Tampa – let alone the beaches of Gulf shrimp landings didn't take “generations” to rebound – they quickly returned to pre-spill levels.

The spill didn't “strikeout” Louisiana's brown pelicans. A year later, the population was so strong, in fact, that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was predicting nesting would be “the most productive since Katrina.”

Probably no warning was more off base than the one about tourism. Crowds have flocked to the Gulf every year since the spill, setting records in 2011 – 2012 – and 2013. And 2014 is on track to be another record-setter.

And here are a few more key facts.

We cleaned most public beaches to a depth of four feet, leaving them in better shape than they've been in years.



With a few exceptions not related to the spill, commercial seafood landings since 2011 are consistent with levels before the spill.

Last year, recreational fishermen caught more pounds of fish than they have in nearly 30 years.

And more than 10,000 government tests show it's all safe to eat.

The point of all this is the environmental effects of the spill were not as far reaching or long lasting as many predicted. The post-spill populations of many signature Gulf species, such as pelicans, shrimp, and red snapper, are normal.

We've seen no data indicating the spill caused the population of any species to crash... or even fall below levels you would have projected before the spill.

So how do you bridge the gap between everyone's fears – again completely justifiable at the time – and the reality today?

I would contend you have to look at the full picture. If you do so, there are four factors that are unavoidable, and together those factors mitigated the spill's impact.

The first is the Gulf's inherent resilience. Natural seeps and microbial communities that consume oil are a well-documented phenomenon in the Gulf of Mexico – one that scientists agree has been occurring for millions of years.

According to the National Research Council, these seeps release up to 1.4 million barrels of oil every year – the equivalent of nearly six Exxon Valdez spills.

Because of this natural presence of oil in the Gulf, microbes have adapted over time to feast on oil. Several studies have shown that these "voracious" microbes consumed a significant amount of oil after the spill.

Second, the spill's location. It occurred in deep water – 5,000 feet below the surface – and more than 40 miles from shore in a temperate climate. That allowed a lot of oil to dissolve, evaporate, deteriorate or be physically removed before it reached land.

Third, the type of oil involved – Louisiana sweet crude, a light oil that biodegrades and evaporates faster than most other crudes and bears little resemblance to the heavier crude spilled by the Valdez.

Fourth – the unprecedented response, which over four years, involved more than 100,000 people and more than 70 million hours. This massive, sustained effort greatly minimized the spill's impact on wildlife and their habitats.

A key element of the response was the use of dispersants.

Then, as now, I believe, critical context has been missing in the public debate about dispersants, such as the fact they are an essential component of most countries' offshore oil spill response plans.

And that we used dispersants after the spill under the direction of the United States government, following strict protocols that helped prevent exposure to people and minimize their impact on wildlife.

Those who object to their use seem to believe that not using them would have been consequence free. In fact, that decision would have carried enormous consequences, allowing far more oil to reach the Gulf shoreline.



The only responsible choice was to protect the coast to the greatest extent possible. In fact, Thad Allen, the retired Coast Guard admiral who oversaw the response, said, “There is not one single decision I made on dispersants I would reverse.”

Now, I noticed you honored the “60 Minutes Australia” piece here tonight. I can’t help but point out that none of this important context was included in that story... even though we provided it to producers.

And that is emblematic of the larger problem: there needs to be less sensationalism and more balance and context to tell the whole story of the health of the Gulf.

Often, it’s advocacy groups that are pushing a narrow, one-sided perspective. Many of them cherry-pick facts and promote studies that paint an incomplete and inaccurate picture. And they continue to blame BP for any and all environmental problems afflicting the Gulf.

Here are just a few examples of where we see this dynamic playing out.

These groups claim the spill harmed the Gulf’s oyster population. What they don’t tell you is that government sampling in 2010, 2011 and 2012 did not document a single visibly oiled oyster bed. In 2013, researchers found some tar balls on a single bed in Louisiana, but the government has not yet disclosed if they were even from the spill.

To the extent that oyster populations are down, data indicates it is likely due to other factors, such as Louisiana’s misguided decision after the accident to divert fresh water from the Mississippi River into the Gulf, followed soon after by historic flooding, both of which lowered salinity in the near-shore environment to harmful levels.

Another exaggeration has to do with coral. Activists have pounced on research claiming to have discovered a total of three coral communities that show signs of damage from the oil spill – evidence, they say, the spill was “much worse than people think.”

But in jumping to that conclusion, they have, once again, ignored key facts. Those three coral communities, according to the researchers, are each the size of one or two tennis courts in a body of water bigger than Texas, Montana and California combined.

The researchers found many more communities – even some closer to the wellhead – that weren’t damaged, and they found no damaged coral more than 22 kilometers from it. All of these facts – pulled right from the research – unfortunately have been overlooked.

Finally, let’s talk about tuna. Some groups would have you believe that oil from the spill causes irregular heartbeats in tuna that can lead to heart attacks, or even death.

But the study they hang their hats on doesn’t show that. It shows that if you’re in a laboratory, and you drench tuna heart cells with oil at concentrations rarely seen in the Gulf, that could lead to problems. But real tuna in the real Gulf during the real spill were never exposed to anything like that.

In fact, many of the studies that activists push are far removed from the reality of the resilient Gulf environment.

To be clear... the Gulf does have many stressors – both natural and manmade. Hurricanes... droughts... freshwater flooding... coastal erosion... industrial and agricultural pollution... and a dead zone the size of Connecticut, due largely to years of fertilizer runoff from the Mississippi River.

All those things have had a negative impact – as did the spill. But remember BP alone, among all the parties, stepped up from the beginning and acknowledged its role in the accident. To date, we have spent more than \$27 billion on response, clean-up, and claims.



We remain committed to restoring those natural resources that reliable data and science determine the spill injured. But we should not be accountable for damages caused by the acts of others, or those conjured up by opportunistic advocacy groups, and certainly not those that stem from problems that have plagued the Gulf for decades.

The public looks to you all to help explain those distinctions.

And we are committed to assisting you with that.

Since I joined BP three years ago, we've made it a priority to respond to reporter inquiries in a timely manner. We are making our people available on the record more than ever. And our website – stateofthegulf.com – provides our positions on scientific and legal issues stemming from the spill. Also, we're making NRDA data available for researchers and reporters on gulfsciencedata.bp.com.

My point is... there are plenty of ways to ensure your stories have the full context.

By all means, ask tough questions of us, challenge our assertions, demand proof. We're used to such skepticism and welcome the opportunity to address it. But we'd ask that you apply the same level of doubt and analytical rigor to others' claims, theories and allegations.

Finally, as you write about the Gulf, please consider the four factors I outlined earlier... about the Gulf's natural resilience, the spill's location, the type of oil involved, and the overwhelming response. I also hope that you will try to distinguish between damages the spill caused and damage done by other stressors.

Without this essential context, no one can truly understand the Gulf's condition today.

Thank you for giving me your attention this evening, and in the time remaining I'd be pleased to take your questions.