Lessons from Industrial Disaster in an Unpredictable Age

written by Guy Walker | May 9, 2011

As the Gulf oil spill of April 2010 came and went — public outcry now quieted and offshore drilling now resumed — so too seems the case with the nuclear fallout of Japan. Currently, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) are determining the future of more than a dozen aging nuclear reactors in the United States, some of which are of the same design as the Fukushima Daiichi reactors that exploded and melted down last month. The bureaucrats at NRC however, have never denied a nuclear plant application for renewal. No other time is more appropriate to reconsider the sensibility and safety of nuclear energy than now, and yet, no other time was more appropriate to reconsider offshore drilling than after the Gulf oil disaster.

When industry fails — and history recounts it always has — our response needs to be an innovative outlook into the sensibility of the industry accountable. Too often however, industry complies with middling safety improvements and well-clad public relations campaign. Take, for instance, the Bhopal disaster of 1984, in which a Union Carbide pesticide plant leaked methyl isocyanate gas and other chemicals, exposing hundreds of thousands of people to its poisons. In response, Dow Chemical purchased the company in 2001, and launched a $US10 million public relations campaign, introducing such marketable notions as "the human element", assuring the public that the company's ethics have changed for humanity's benefit. British Petroleum's response to the Gulf disaster created further environmental disruption. Rather than turning to any of the other innumerable non-toxic methods of cleanup, BP treated the Gulf with two highly toxic dispersants, Corexit EC9500A and Corexit EC9527A, both of which are well associated with Exxon and BP.

With a history of disreputable industrial-led cleanup, one understandably grows concerned over the recent response to the nuclear fallout of Fukushima Daiichi. When radiation levels above reactor 2 continue to increase to 6,500 times over the legal limit, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spends afternoon tea with Emperor Akihito, one doubts the legitimacy of solutions underway.

Safety standards prove incompetent to contain the unpredictable and volatile. Two weeks before the Gulf disaster, President Obama had reopened much of coastline to drilling, stating, "It turns out, by this way, that oil rigs generally don't cause oil spills. They are technologically very advanced." Having to sheepishly recount this statement after the oil platform exploded, Obama assured the nation that he would only lift the moratorium "under the assurance that it would be absolutely safe."

Now, I'm not sure what President Obama's criteria for "absolutely safe" is, nor do I know under what measures the NRC has determined that every single nuclear plant is safe for renewal. But I do know this: the unpredictable is inevitable. In an age of rapidly changing climate, when unpredictable weather is the new normal forecast, we cannot consider industry in the same manner that we originally exercised in order to build our current industrial era. Following the Fukushima Daiichi disaster, President Obama called for a safety review of the 104 nuclear power reactors in the United States. Yet, no safety review can possibly be comprehensive enough to secure against a hostile, most unpredictable era of climate change. In today's broadcast, when fires rage across Arizona, and tornados flatten much of the South, even the unlikeliest of hazards become high risk.

The signatory warning of a failing industry however, should not depend on disasters like the

Bhopal leak, the Gulf oil spill, or the nuclear fallout in Japan. Even if these industry sectors performed with perfect records, meeting the most rigorous standards of safety, they would still be the primary cause of species extinction, climate change, acid rain, ozone depletion, and a whole list of other irrevocable planetary disasters. In the words of the environmental economist E.F. Schumacher, "Man talks of a battle with Nature, forgetting that if he won the battle, he would find himself on the losing side." President Obama's "absolutely safe" standard seems not to include these inevitable effects, nor does the NRC seem to consider the 10,000-year half-life of nuclear waste or the horizon of volatile storms, nor does Dow Chemical seem to include real human life in their "human element" campaign.

And though a swelling bandwagon is bustling towards the likes of solar, wind, and geothermal energy, the central problem is still left unconsidered. With global population topping 7 billion, and the level of consumption ever-growing — developing nations pursuing the equivalent quality of life as the United States, and the United States demanding still better and more — these alternative energy sources cannot fulfill their demands. A "small is beautiful" era is needed. A retirement, not a safety review, is most needed for the oil, nuclear, and pesticide industries — idealistic, wishful thinking, of course, yet not nearly as naïve as the industrial assumption of infinite resource exploitation, unlimited population growth, and unregulated dumping.

The rare disaster is only a phase of debate and outcry. Time pushes each disaster back into a hazy memory until the next adversity of unpredictable strikes. This age needs to be different. Public outcry cannot die because climate change is not going away anytime soon. The more industry expands its sectors to meet energy needs, the more at risk are public health, public safety, and planetary security.

Guy Walker is a young environmental activist from Idyllwild, California. The summer of 2011, he will bicycle across the United States, confronting corporate agricultural powers, helping to return food democracy to the people.