

Oil spill

On 20th April 2010 disaster struck the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico, about 80 km off the US coast.

A huge explosion 1,500 metres below sea-level caused three leaks in the system. As a result at least 5,000 barrels of oil have been pouring into the sea every day ever since. No one can say exactly how much damage it will cause, but the company responsible, BP (British Petroleum), has agreed to pay for it. The firm is spending about \$33,000,000 a day in clean-up costs and this figure may rise.

The nearby Gulf Coast contains over 25% of the USA's wetlands and is very rich in wildlife. This large, uninhabited region is an important nature reserve and is home to some rare animals, including species of turtles, whales and numerous water birds. Many species are now in very serious danger.

Meanwhile, locals working in fishing and tourism – key industries of the region – are holding their breath. Fishing for crab, shrimp, oysters and other fish is a traditional way of life here, and is extremely important economically. There are also many related businesses such as fish-oil factories, canning industries and sea-food restaurants.

BP and the authorities are working hard to limit the damage, experimenting with different methods. They have used chemicals to break up the oil, both underwater and from the air. They have burned some of it, as well as placing special barriers or 'booms' on the water surface, to contain the oil (interestingly, some of these 'booms' are made of human hair!). Soon after the incident, an underwater robot was used to try and fix the leak. Local officials also opened gates in the Mississippi River, hoping that the extra fresh water might push the oil away from the coast.

In addition, engineers designed a huge dome to go over the main leak with a tube to siphon oil from the leak into a tanker on the surface. Meanwhile, BP are building a new oil rig, but this will take several weeks to complete.

It will take decades for the environment to recover from a spill of this size, as it did after the last one*. This new disaster forces governments to question their dependence on oil and other fossil fuels. It will certainly damage the US government's plans to start drilling for oil offshore again. Environmentalists argue that oil is always a risky business, and that the use of renewable energy is the only safe choice. In any case, many experts believe global demand for fossil fuels now exceeds supply.

** In March 1989, the oil tanker (ship) Exxon Valdez ran aground, spilling its oil into pure Alaskan waters and affecting over 2,000 km of coastline and wildlife.*

1 Read the text and add these paragraph descriptions to the appropriate paragraph (paragraphs 2–7). There is one extra description that you do not need.

- a the effect on the fishing industry
- b the future and the use of fossil fuels
- c the danger to animals in the area
- d attempts to limit the damage
- e other attempts to limit the damage
- f how other countries are helping
- g what happened in the disaster and the costs

2 Read the text again and find out which clean-up methods are mentioned:

- 1 Setting the oil on fire
- 2 Spraying chemicals on the oil from planes
- 3 Using equipment to frighten birds and animals away from the oil
- 4 Using floating barriers to contain the oil
- 5 Watching and waiting for nature to help
- 6 Letting the river flow quickly into the sea
- 7 Using boats to 'skim' the oil of the surface (like taking cream off milk)
- 8 Using a robot mechanic
- 9 Replacing the broken oil rig
- 10 Collecting the oil on the beaches
- 11 Putting chemicals at the leak itself
- 12 Taking the oil out through a tube

3 Find the following in the text. Use a dictionary to help you, if necessary.

- 1 Six animals (including sea creatures)
- 2 Four quantities
- 3 Three industries which are connected to fishing, but not directly
- 4 Two reasons for using renewable sources of energy

4 Find and underline four examples of the present continuous in the text. Explain to your partner why you think this form is used in these cases.

5 Role-play the fisherman/fisherwoman and the US President. Your teacher will give you a role card. Read it and prepare what you are going to say.

Glossary

barrier (*noun*) - a structure that stops people or things from entering an area or place

coast (*noun*) - an area of land along the edge of a sea: *the east coast of England*

damage (*noun*) - physical harm: *the house suffered only minor damage in the fire*

damage (*verb*): *the fire damaged some of the furniture*

fossil fuel (*noun*) - coal or oil used as fuel

siphon (*verb*) - to make something move from one place or container to another through a narrow tube

incident (*noun*) - something that happens which is unusual or dangerous

nature reserve (*noun*) - an area of land in which the animals and plants are protected

region (*noun*) - a large area of land

renewable energy (*noun*) - this is energy which can replace itself through natural processes, and can never be used up, eg solar or wind

species (*noun*) - a plant or animal group whose members all have similar general features:

there are about forty different species of dolphin

wetlands (*noun*) - low land that is often covered with water from the river, lake or sea next to it