

Oil Spill Gives Urgency to UN Oceans Meeting

By [Global Research](#)

Global Research, May 05, 2010

[Inter Press Service](#) 5 May 2010

Theme: [Environment](#), [United Nations](#)

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PARIS – The disastrous oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has given increased urgency to the fifth Global Oceans Conference taking place here at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

The five-day meeting, which ends May 7, has brought together 823 delegates from 80 countries to discuss ways to preserve marine biodiversity and improve “governance” of the oceans, in the face of pollution, climate change and over-fishing.

Their talks come as oil continues to surge into the Gulf from an undersea pipeline rupture, threatening marine life, and leading some participants to call for a freeze in new offshore drilling.

“We think there should be a suspension of offshore explorations, especially in the Arctic, until the regulations are tighter and the response gap to an oil spill is closed,” said William Eichbaum, vice president for marine and Arctic policy at the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

“The assumption was that this accident could not have happened, and if there hadn’t been this assumption, the regulations might have been tighter,” he told journalists Tuesday.

In the two weeks since the Apr. 20 explosion on the Deepwater Horizon offshore drilling rig, and BP’s efforts to contain the oil spill, the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama has been reviewing its policy and has indicated that no new licenses will be awarded for offshore exploration. Obama had given the green light in March to companies that received permits under the Bush administration.

But Eichbaum told IPS that existing licenses should be suspended as well, especially as oil companies plan to start drilling in places such as Alaska in the coming months.

“There are unknown elements in the Arctic and severe limitations because of extreme weather and ice conditions,” he said. “The government needs to go over the regulatory systems and be sure that they’re adequate. To those who say offshore drilling is a safe industry, we’ve learned that they’re wrong.”

Apart from the oil spill, the oceans conference is taking place at an important time for scientists and policy makers, especially in light of climate change and targets that should have been met this year, according to Dr. Bilitiana Cicin-Sain, the meeting’s co-chair and head of the secretariat of the Global Forum on Oceans, Coasts and Islands, one of the organisers along with UNESCO and the government of France.

In 2010, the UN’s International Year of Biodiversity, countries around the world are expected

to have taken steps to halt biodiversity loss and to have met “major international targets” set by heads of state at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, Cacin-Sain said.

States also need to work together and employ integrated “ecosystem-based approaches” to govern the various uses of the ocean, from transportation to oil exploration, she said.

She told journalists that some progress had been made but added that there was a “very bad situation of management” in areas outside of national jurisdiction.

The absence of a solid outcome from last year’s Copenhagen conference on climate change was disappointing, but it also means that scientists and policy makers have an opportunity to make a “stronger and more coherent case for the importance of oceans and coasts in the emerging climate regime”, Cacin-Sain said.

“The global oceans community needs to develop a comprehensive program related to oceans and coasts, emphasising the adoption of the most stringent reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, within a short time frame,” she told conference participants.

Statistics from the Global Forum on Oceans suggest that rising levels of carbon dioxide have raised ocean acidity by 30 percent, “making the oceans more acidic now than they have been for the last 650,000 years”. The consequences are dying coral reefs and a negative impact on marine organisms.

At the same time, oceans are suffering from over-fishing, with the public’s demand for fish exceeding the ocean’s ability to replenish stocks, according to some scientists. The conference is also focusing on other challenges such as rising sea levels and the “retreat” of glaciers. Experts, including Cacin-Sain, will make recommendations to governments on how to address these issues.

Meanwhile, national officials and parliamentarians will hold “high-level” meetings Wednesday to discuss perspectives on the key global issues and outline steps that the international community should take in the next five years.

One of the main recommendations is to speed up the development of alternative energy so that carbon emissions can be reduced.

“But what do we do in the meantime?” Cacin-Sain asked. “We’re in a transitional stage and there are no easy answers.” She added, however, that there was an obligation to “build a vision” for the future and develop a blueprint for specific actions.

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