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W.Va. and Gulf of Mexico disasters muddy the image of 'clean' energy industries

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Can the energy industry ever be truly clean?

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- » Disasters muddy the image of 'clean' coal and oil industries
- [Search discontinued for 11 missing after oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico](#)

The lethal explosions this month in a West Virginia coal mine and on a Gulf of Mexico drilling platform have served as reminders that the energy industry remains a sometimes dangerous endeavor, despite advances in safety and environmental practices.

On Friday, a flotilla of Coast Guard and oil industry vessels searched for 11 missing oil workers, skimmed oil from the surface of the waters 130 miles southeast of Louisiana and sprayed chemicals to disperse the oil spilled when the Transocean Deepwater Horizon caught fire and sank. The Coast Guard abandoned its search effort Friday afternoon. Meanwhile, federal inspectors said that high levels of combustible methane might delay by a month their investigation of the Massey Energy coal mine blast that killed 29 workers April 5.

Advertisement Separately, West Virginia officials said a 28-year-old miner died Friday morning after being crushed Thursday night between a piece of heavy equipment and a block of coal at International Coal Group's Beckley mining complex in Raleigh County. The complex was one of 32 coal mines identified by federal safety officials for tougher enforcement measures but not targeted because of a backlog of unresolved citation appeals by mine operators.

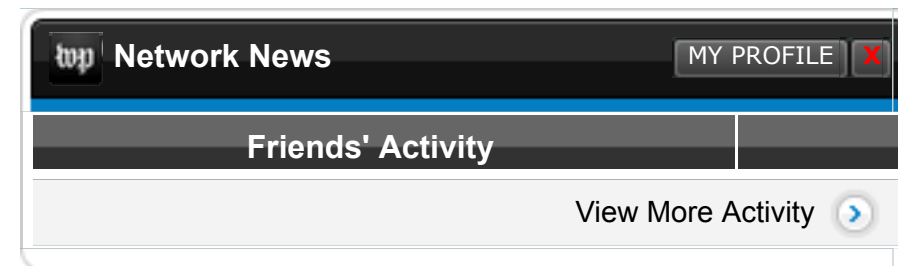
From the Obama administration's point of view, the timing of the accidents is inconvenient. Just last month, officials unveiled a plan for expanded offshore drilling in the Atlantic, central Gulf of Mexico and waters off Alaska's coast. Interior Secretary [Ken Salazar](#) talked about "drilling in the right ways and the right places" and "opening a new chapter for balanced and responsible oil and gas development here at home." The administration's allies in the Senate are planning to roll out a climate bill next week at an event that its sponsors hope will feature executives from three major oil companies, including BP, which had leased the Transocean drilling platform that caught fire this week, spilling crude oil from below the ocean floor and losing supply tanks with as much as 700,000 gallons of diesel fuel.

The disaster at Massey Energy's Upper Big Branch mine also tarnishes the image of "clean coal," a phrase the industry and even the president have used to bolster support for coal. Sources familiar with the climate bill's contents, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly, said that it would set aside \$10 billion to pay for "clean-coal technology" that would capture and store carbon dioxide emissions from burning coal.

But even if that still costly and unproven technology works, coal would still need to be dug from the ground, skimmed from mountaintops and transported by rail, critics note.



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"Clean coal is an oxymoron," said Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Campaign at the Center for Auto Safety. He is no more positive about the oil industry. "Despite the pious claims of oil industry ads, [lobbyists](#) and [former vice president [Richard B.\] Cheney](#), oil drilling is a filthy, deadly business," Becker said. "They claim that they can just put a straw into the ocean and suck up oil with nary a minnow or crab disturbed."

Yet that's where oil and coal are found, and the United States remains heavily dependent on both. Half of the nation's electricity comes from coal.

And offshore drilling will be needed just to keep domestic oil production steady and contain U.S. dependence on foreign oil. Currently, 35 percent of U.S. production comes from the Gulf of Mexico, according to Energy Information Administration figures. And oil companies are having to move into deeper waters to find new supplies. The Transocean rig was in waters nearly 5,000 feet deep, and the critically important blowout prevention device was on the sea floor, where pressures are high and temperatures extremely cold.

"Larger-scale platforms in deeper waters add a complexity and a risk," said Mike Sawyer, a Houston-based engineer at Apex Safety Consultants. Sawyer, who thinks the industry can drill with "reasonable risk," has been warning of dangers at a different BP platform in the Gulf, the Atlantis, which is drilling in even deeper waters.

What is reasonable remains in the eye of the beholder. Obama has tried to sell voters -- and lawmakers -- on a package of climate measures, nuclear plant incentives, offshore drilling and coal industry aid under the sometimes conflicting banners of climate security and national security.

This week, lawmakers and lobbyists who have been working to put together the climate bill sponsored by [Sens. John F. Kerry](#) (D-Mass.), [Lindsey O. Graham](#) (R-S.C.) and [Joseph I. Lieberman](#) (I-Conn.) were worrying that the images from the Gulf oil rig and the Massey coal mine could make that sale trickier.

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