



## Drillers in the Spotlight

There is an underlying message in my article this month. You cannot turn on the radio or television without hearing about the drilling industry these days. It does not matter that it's offshore oil drilling – for Joe Public, it is drilling. For our non-industry friends, you and I are in the same business. It is kind of like a Texan working in the Midwest. Everyone knows someone from Texas, and wants to know if you know them. Church friends want to talk about BP, yet they are taken aback when I compliment the company on the clean restrooms. You see, my only transaction with them has been from my local gas station.

My daughter, Emma, used to have to explain that her dad worked with mud. Today, people not only are familiar with drilling mud, but also mud weight, blowout preventers, top kills, top hats and who knows what else they will be taught this summer. The illustrations being done by the networks and cable news shows are detailed, and people are following it. It is the topic of conversation everywhere, and this week held me up at the U.S./Canadian border while two customs agents quizzed me on “what I would do.” (The BP restroom crack didn't go over very well.)

One cable station has a place on its Web site for people to put oil cleanup ideas. They have been getting between 5,000 hits and 10,000 hits a day. My point is that the industry is in the spotlight – for the wrong reasons, but like it or not, we all have been lumped together and tied to this mess. God bless the people of the Gulf Region, as they have their lives disrupted once again; let's hope the oil is stopped by the time this article is published. The federal government now is involved, and working to put more regulations in place for drilling operations.

In northeast Ohio, where I live, the drilling industry was just getting local press due to the increased drilling in the Marcellus Shale. In June of this year, that all changed, and the coverage went national overnight. There had been a natural gas blowout in the region. “The



Negative press about various types of drilling already has resulted in pending regulations for the industry. Operations continue to mitigate the effects of the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill in late June, including flaring operations conducted by the drillship Discoverer Enterprise. Photo courtesy of Petty Officer 3rd Class Jaclyn Young/U.S. Coast Guard.

accident, which occurred in Lawrence Township, spewed at least 35,000 gallons of wastewater into the air for 16 hours until the well was finally capped the following day,” stated an article by Anya Litvak in the *Pittsburgh Business Times*. This blowout caused the suspension of drilling in the Marcellus Shale, and threw the drilling industry into the public spotlight again.

Before the accident, the local press focused on the high concentration of salt and drilling additives being used in the natural gas drilling process. Brine had been showing up in freshwater lakes, streams and rivers. The Monongahela River has been listed ninth on American Rivers ([www.americanrivers.org](http://www.americanrivers.org)) list of troubled waters. Their number 1 is the Upper Delaware River in Pennsylvania and New York. For both of these rivers, the group lists “natural gas extraction” as the villain.

In June, the Fracturing Responsibility and Awareness of Chemicals (FRAC) Act was introduced by Pennsylvania senator Bob Casey. In a nutshell, the bill wants the drilling fluids and additives identified and available to the public. And not just available, but posted online. The

concern is that these fluids are making their way into freshwater aquifers and contaminating fresh potable water – a point that industry leaders deny. Since 2005, oil and gas operations are exempt from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Safe Drinking Water Act. The federal government now is involved, and working to put more regulations in place for drilling operations.

A few years back, a county in one of my states pulled the plug on horizontal directional drilling (HDD) after a gas line was hit. Suddenly HDD was in the news – again for the wrong reason, but drilling was in the spotlight. HDD has resumed, but the local government got involved, and did put more regulations in place for horizontal directional drilling operations in that county.

You may remember my article on Walkerton, Ontario (*National Driller*, June 2008), and the problems the community had due to a contaminated water source. The spotlight hit the drilling community again. The Canadian government got involved, and put more regulations in place for drilling operations.

We work in the drilling industry, and we drill for oil, gas and water. We drill

under rivers, roads, rails and wetlands, as we connect fiber, water, gas and electric. The drilling industry is green, as we help install geothermal, wind and solar farm systems. Sometimes we are drilling air vents to help our brother miners who are in trouble. Drillers affect everyone's lives, and we do it safely and routinely everyday. But when something goes wrong, we are going to be put in the spotlight. In the Navy, we said, “One gotcha will wipe out 200 attaboys!”

The water well and geothermal industries are just two of my market segments, and the longevity of the business is one of my and my co-workers concerns. While some states have very good drilling regulations, some do not. Some have no well construction laws at all. Most of the states and providences that do have good laws and guidelines adopted them on their own, and our industry professionals have helped write them.

My concern – and your concern should be – that there will be an accident in a state that has no existing or only inadequate well laws, and the federal government will get involved, and work to put more regulations in place for our industry. This will affect us all – nationwide. As more regulations are put in place for the offshore oil drillers, even the companies running safe operations today will have to conform to the new rules.

In his book, *Today's The Day*, Jim Stovall shares “The Wisdom of the Snapping Turtle.” You know that a snapping turtle can snap a pencil in two – “if you stick your finger in and he bites it off; is it your fault or his?” He sums up this story by writing, “We don't fail because we don't know what to do; we fail because we don't do what we know.” For us, I think that means we won't get in trouble as an industry because we don't know what needs to be done; we will get in trouble because we don't fix what we know needs to be fixed. **ND**

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