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Rutgers disaster expert Lee Clarke says BP "overpromised," which led to Gulf oil spill

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BY VIOLET SNOW

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"BP has taken a technology used successfully at shallower depths and assumed they knew what they were doing a mile down," said Lee Clarke, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Sociology at Rutgers University. Clarke is also the author of books on disaster preparedness — and the lack of it.

Clarke commented May 2 on the oil pouring into the ocean after an explosion damaged an underwater rig owned by British Petroleum (BP), 50 miles from the Louisiana coast.

In his books *Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination* (University of Chicago Press, 2006) and *Mission Impossible: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disaster* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), Clarke explored what happens when experts and organizations "overpromise — say they'll do things they can't do or don't know if they can do. In this case, BP promised they could control any problems at the wellhead."

But, as many other organizations do, said Clarke, "They didn't sufficiently create a worst-case scenario, imagining possibilities that go beyond what's easily addressed. It's up to a private company to develop a plan, which then has to be approved by the relevant government agents — they all have to sign off on it. People weren't paying attention."

The 1989 Exxon Valdez spill, which dumped an estimated 10.8 million gallons oil into the ocean off the coast of Alaska, led to the Oil Pollution Act of 1990. "It mandated that the oil industry put together regional centers for plans and equipment to deal with oil spills," explained Clarke. "There's one in Houston. They work well for oil spilled in contained areas, rivers and lakes. But trying to respond to a big oil spill on the open seas is insurmountable. You can't burn it because you can't get enough of it together. Prevention is the way to go. There are no success stories — it's a big ocean with a lot

of weather."

Regarding the ongoing clean-up operations, Clarke observed, "It appears they're doing everything people are expecting them to do. They're dumping gallons of dispersant on it, which is toxic in itself and drives the oil into the water and breaks it up. That's better for the birds, so they don't land in it, but it's not good for fish, oysters, shrimp, the ocean bottom."

He added, " That fact is, in Alaska, there was a lot of damage from the clean-up operation. I expect they're working as hard as they can to turn the well off, but they are, so to speak, way out of their depth. If they can cap the well soon, it won't be that bad. If they have to drill a relief well (a nearby well that would take the pressure off the one that's spouting oil), it could take one to two months. Meanwhile, the official estimate, that they're spilling 5000 barrels a day — that's 210,000 gallons — is just a guess. And the real amount is probably not less than that."

When asked what will happen to BP, Clarke referred again to the Valdez spill. "If Exxon's any indication, they'll get sued. Exxon didn't pay for 19 years — they kept it in court, and the amount kept getting cut back. BP has a long record of letting production pressures drive their safety operations. They had a big explosion at a Texas refinery, and there have been leaks on the Alaska pipeline, where they're a big player."

In 2008, the Supreme Court ruled that Exxon Mobil had to pay \$507.5 million, a tenth of the original jury award, according to the Los Angeles Times. The previous year, the oil giant had made \$40.6 billion in profits.

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