



The oil spill catastrophe now engulfing the Gulf Coast brings home in incredibly vivid detail the ways in which human activity can damage the earth. This is in stark contrast to climate change, for example, where the changes caused by accumulating greenhouse gas emissions are hard to see and where actions today will only affect the climate many decades from now (Eric has [previously blogged](#) about the political difficulties raised by the fact that even with serious regulatory action to curb carbon emissions climate change will continue to occur because of past human activity.) The BP oil spill, by contrast, looks more similar to environmental harms of the 1960s and 1970s: the burning of the Cuyahoga River; the 1969 oil spill off the coast of southern California; visibly dirty air in cities across the country but particularly in Los Angeles. Each of those catastrophic events contributed to large changes in public policy and ultimately to the passage of the Clean Water Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and the Clean Air Act. The Exxon Valdez spill 20 years ago (see Rick's post [here](#)) led to less dramatic policy responses but quite tangibly to requirements that oil tankers be double hulled.

So what policy changes, if any, will come from the BP oil spill? Most immediately, at least in the short run it's hard to imagine that Obama's [lifting of the offshore drilling moratorium](#) will survive, and indeed he's [already imposed](#) a short term ban on new drilling. Perhaps the spill will also lead the White House's Council on Environmental Quality to require agencies preparing Environmental Impact Statements under NEPA to conduct a worst-case analysis, described by Holly [here](#). (For evidence that the Department of the Interior significantly underestimated the risk of a catastrophic spill in the Gulf of Mexico, see [here](#)). It's also possible that the spill will lead the Department of Interior to [increase its regulatory oversight](#) of oil drilling, requiring serious substantive changes to drilling in order to reduce dramatically the risk of another catastrophic spill. And surely the spill ought to strengthen the case to be made in favor of alternative energy and energy efficiency.

But one potentially negative effect of the spill is to damage the already small likelihood that Congress will enact climate change legislation this year. President Obama has offered concessions to Republicans for new offshore drilling in exchange for support of climate

legislation but now some Democrats and environmentalists [want to ensure](#) that the climate legislation contains no such concessions. On the other hand, perhaps the focus on the dangers of oil drilling will persuade at least some politicians and the American public that polluters — including greenhouse gas emitters — have to bear responsibility for the harms they cause.