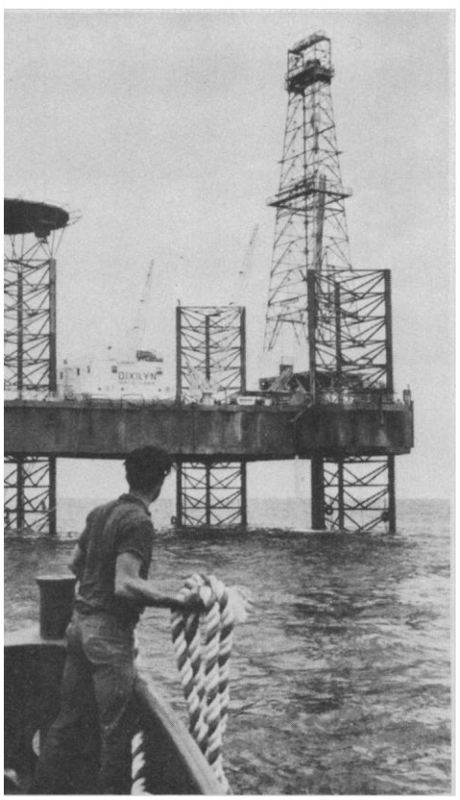
Offshore Drilling Safety Questioned

James Watt says that offshore drilling poses no threat to the environment, but a new Academy report is not so sure

Secretary of the Interior James Watt is moving rapidly to sell drillers the right to explore for oil on the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS), 3 miles out to sea from the coast of California and Alaska. Despite strong opposition from environmental groups and from the Governor of California, Watt is forging ahead because he says the country needs the oil and he does not think that drilling for it will damage the environment. He made public his decision and his reasoning in April, before seeing a report on the hazards of offshore development written for his department by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS). The report was released on 5 June.



Shell Oil Company

The Department of the Interior wants to expand oil drilling off the West Coast.

Although the NAS study does not directly contradict what Watt has said, it does raise questions about the wisdom of rushing full tilt into an ocean drilling program, particularly in "frontier" areas which have not yet been exploited and where it will be more difficult to maintain safe and clean drilling standards.

Watt presented his thinking most thoroughly on 28 April, before oversight hearings in the House subcommittee on environment, energy and natural resources, chaired by Representative Toby Moffett (D–Conn.). Watt said he knew of no ill effects of OCS drilling, and he mentioned the two worst accidents in recent experience: the Santa Barbara well blowout in 1969 and the Mexican blowout at Ixtoc last year. These did no damage, he said: "Our Interior Department biological scientists report that there have been no known significant, long-term damages to the marine resources as a result of either of these spills." Watt added that drilling dry holes produces "absolutely no environmental impact," and that tankers carrying foreign oil cause more ocean pollution than drilling. The controversy over OCS drilling, Watt suggested, had little to do with health or safety and a lot to do with parochial worries about real estate values and the tourist trade.

While it does not deal specifically with the issues confronting Watt in his decision to lease some tracts off the coast of California, the NAS report does indicate that the risks of drilling on the OCS are not as trivial as the Secretary might have us believe.

The environmental hazards fall chiefly into two categories: those created by rare but severe accidents like the Santa Barbara and Ixtoc well blowouts, and those created by the routine dumping of drilling fluids, processed well-water, and cuttings from the well. The only point on which the scientists agree, according to the report, is that the first kind of hazard—a large, accidental spill—does have "toxic and smothering effects" on a wide variety of marine creatures. The experts disagree quite sharply on whether the effects of such big spills endure and on the extent of damage done by routine chemical and mud dumping.

Among the many findings and recommendations the report offers the Department of the Interior several are of special interest:

- There is no basis for saying that increased drilling on the OCS will or will not do harm to marine life, because the scientists disagree on the long-term effects of oil pollution. One major piece of work sponsored by the oil industry has been challenged. Produced in 1974 by the Gulf Universities Research Consortium this research found that oil drillers had not done any damage to the Gulf of Mexico environment in 30 years. Research done at other sites contradicts this conclusion. The NAS report asks the Department of the Interior to try to end dissension in the scientific community by funding a review that would set common standards for future work and sift through work already done.
- Since there is no agreement on the extent of damage being done, it is impossible to say whether waste-dumping regulations are adequate. Nevertheless, the NAS report says that the three agencies involved in this business—the Coast Guard, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Geological Survey—should simplify and clarify the rules that govern the dumping of mud and liquids on the OCS. The government should also try to set clear standards before granting a drilling permit, not afterwards, as is often the case.
- Poor training seems to be the major cause of accidents and spills on the OCS. Because the number of skilled technicians is limited, and because drilling is on the increase, the NAS committee thought there was a danger that blowouts might increase. "Industry should compensate for inexperience in the workforce through improved training, tighter procedures, and closer management surveillance."
- To encourage the industry to raise the standards of performance on OCS rigs, the committee decided the government should consider adopting some new regulations. The report suggests that it might be a good idea to set higher safety standards, to let the public know which companies are cooperating, and possibly to allow only companies with a good record to drill on the OCS.
- Data collection should be improved so that the government and interested researchers will have a better idea of what is happening on the OCS. The government's methods "are inadequate for developing important information on safety problems and innovations. . . .

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Nor is the government able to identify the poorer performers and target them for close and continuous scrutiny. . . ." Among other things, the NAS report says the government should "conduct more comprehensive and frequent investigations of OCS accidents (and near misses)" to learn about their causes and effects.

At the moment, Watt is pausing to consider whether or not he should proceed with his West Coast sale (number 53) as planned. A decision is expected in 2 weeks. That will give him time to read and consider the OCS report, which he had not seen when Representative Moffett quizzed him about it last April.

—ELIOT MARSHALL

NIOSH Under Siege

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) is under siege these days. Two weeks ago, the Reagan Administration announced plans to split up the agency's Washington staff and transfer its scientists to Cincinnati and its administrators to Atlanta to be closer to its parent, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). On another front, the agency's proposal to study workers at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard for possible chromosomal damage from ionizing radiation has been denied by Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, deputy assistant secretary for naval reactors for the Department of Energy.

CDC, which has never warmly embraced its Washington member of the family, apparently wants tighter control over NIOSH. Reportedly at the suggestion of CDC director, William Foege, NIOSH is being called home "in order to increase administrative efficiency," the Administration announced. To ensure that control, a CDC veteran was recently named the new director of NIOSH—J. Donald Millar, formerly director of the environmental health center.

Officials from NIOSH, where morale is already sagging after the ouster of director Anthony Robbins earlier this year, say that the transfer is just one more attempt to diminish the agency's importance. They speculate that the Administration's ultimate intent is to phase out the institute, which is responsible for recommending changes in workplace health standards to the regulatory agencies.

"The transfer is supposed to move us into the mainstream of research," says Paul Streudler, a senior scientist for radiation. "Is that the Chattahoochee?"

"The move is, in effect, obliterating NIOSH," says Robbins, who is now an aide to Representative John Dingell (D–Mich.). "CDC has never accepted NIOSH as part of the fold."

As the plans stand now, 50 scientists from the criteria documents branch, which develops regulatory recommendations, will be transferred to Cincinnati where NIOSH already has field offices and laboratories. About 100 administrators and staff will be heading for Atlanta. There is some talk among officials that the group as a whole might try to resist the uprooting.

The relocation will make implementation of workplace standards much tougher, Streudler says. "Rules get made in a social and political framework. We have to take the science and sell it [to the regulatory agencies and to legislators]. I'm not going to be able to do much good if I'm in Atlanta or Cincinnati."

The news about NIOSH drew strong protests from two Democratic congressmen, David Obey of Wisconsin and Joseph Gaydos of Pennsylvania. Obey, who is a member of the house appropriations subcommittee on labor, health, education and welfare, says, "Worker health will not be a priority with CDC." Moving NIOSH to Atlanta would be a "disaster," he says.

With NIOSH officials sending out résumés, looking for realtors and generally wondering what the future will bring next, science at the agency has been pretty much put on hold, including the proposed study of Portsmouth shipyard workers. NIOSH, with the help of Secretary of Health and Human Services Richard Schweiker, has been trying to persuade Rickover since last January to allow the cytogenetics study to proceed. The study would examine 266 workers and 266 controls for any cellular abnormalities that might be associated with exposure to low-level ionizing radiation from the nuclear-powered ships. NIOSH says the study would require 1 to 2 hours of a worker's time to collect blood and sperm samples. The data may ultimately help scientists to determine if any chromosomal damage found can be used as a predictor of disease later in life.

Schweiker wrote Rickover in May, "As long as there is any doubt about the long-term consequences of exposure to ionizing radiation, it is the opinion of NIOSH that studies which can further define the absence or presence of such effects should be performed."

Rickover replied in a letter, dated 3 June, "This statement represents one of the more all-encompassing justification statements I can recall seeing. Indeed, the same thing can be said in support of studying every substance or experience that human beings face. By deleting the words, ionizing radiation, you could substitute milk to motherhood to justify a study of their long-term consequences. The proposed cytogenetic study clearly falls into the category of research for the sake of research."

Rickover concluded the letter by asking Schweiker to cancel the study in the interests of the workers and "the national defense work that must be performed there."

The original concern about the effects of ionizing radiation stems from a study reported by a Boston researcher, Thomas Najarian, in 1978. Najarian, after examining death certificates of shipyard workers, concluded that those who were exposed to low-level radiation suffered twice the expected rate of cancer and have fivefold greater chance of leukemia. Later, under contract with NIOSH, Najarian repeated the study with better data supplied by the Navy. The second study repudiated the earlier findings.

These two investigations only were mortality studies, NIOSH officials say. With the wealth of data on shipyard workers from the previous studies, they argue they have a rare opportunity to conduct a cytogenetic study with relative ease.

With NIOSH in disarray and its political base eroding, agency officials will have a tough time convincing the Navy to let them on base. For the time being, they have bigger problems to tackle.—MARJORIE SUN

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