

# BIG OIL

## 5 years after Deepwater Horizon

*Oil-industry watchdog  
Antonia Juhasz reflects  
on the BP oil spill and  
where the industry stands  
five years after the worst  
marine oil spill in history*



CARLOS BARRIA/REUTERS

A plastic bag contains oil from the Gulf of Mexico oil spill south of Freemason Island, La., on May 7, 2010. Five million barrels of oil spilled into the Gulf after a BP oil rig exploded and sank.

**BY EMILY GREEN**  
STAFF WRITER

Five years ago this April, the United States watched one of the worst environmental disasters in history unfold in the Gulf of Mexico as 5 million barrels of oil spilled into the sea. First came the explosion on British Petroleum's Deepwater Horizon oil rig, killing 11 workers, and then the subsequent leakage from an underwater pipe. For 87 days, oil flowed untethered as the nation watched in horror.

In the years since, the accident and its aftermath have exited center stage, losing the attention of most people living outside of the Gulf region. But it hasn't lost the attention of Antonia Juhasz.

Juhasz, an oil-industry watchdog, author and award-winning journalist based in San Francisco, has investigated the impact of the spill and has been following BP's trial. In her 2011 book, "Black Tide," she chronicled the experiences of people living in the Gulf region, and the families of men who died in the explosion, the public policies that set the event in motion and the oil industry's response.

As the trial over BP's role in the oil spill approaches its conclusion, Juhasz's continued coverage of events has appeared in national publications including Rolling

Stone and The Nation, and her next article will appear in the June issue of Harper's Magazine.

When Juhasz was 26 and working as a legislative assistant on Capitol Hill, she says, she was shocked to discover the amount of influence corporations had on members of Congress, and she switched her focus to addressing those influences. Her attention quickly turned to the "most powerful and wealthy influence at that time," she says: "the oil sector." During the 18 years since, Juhasz has maintained that focus and is one of the foremost experts on the industry today.

Her reporting has taken her to Iraq, Afghanistan and Ecuador, and she's a regular media commentator, appearing on programs including "Democracy Now!," "PBS NewsHour," Fox's "Hannity & Colmes" and NBC's "Today" show.

In 2010, she received the Project Censored Award for her alternative annual report on Chevron. She's also authored "The Bush Agenda" (2006), "The Tyranny of Oil" (2008) and contributed to six other books about the oil industry and globalization.

**Emily Green:** *What effect has the experience of immersing yourself in the lives of the BP oil spill's victims, and then watching*

*the trial — where it looks like BP might escape virtually unscathed — what kind of impact has this had on you?*

**Antonia Juhasz:** First, I wouldn't say that I agree that they're unscathed. While the public has looked away, it's still a very full-blown disaster, including the legal portion, which is still unfolding. BP is still on trial for potentially as much as a \$14 billion fine, and under the Clean Water Act, it is still finishing a process called the Natural Resource Damages Assessment. It's very important for public attention to be focused on these processes — even though it's five years later — to make sure they are held to account.

The thing that's been very frustrating, covering this for five years and in getting to know people impacted very personally, including the families of the men who died on the rig, is how quickly public attention just disappeared. When it comes to public policy to regulate the oil industry, there's been no change whatsoever, from a policy perspective, to regulate offshore oil drilling. The reason why that happened was that the public stopped paying attention. There was pressure that had been building for several months on policy makers, and it looked like there was going to be policy change, but they just waited out the public's attention,

and when the public turned away, the policy evaporated.

Today, instead of better protections for offshore drilling, we have President Obama proposing to open up the Atlantic Coast for offshore drilling, and that's definitely been the saddest part. There are moments when we can come together and support communities that are in trouble, but then we have to stay focused in order for that compassion to turn into action, and that ended pretty quickly outside of the Gulf of Mexico.

**E.G.:** *BP has said there is no way it can pay anywhere near \$14 billion, and it looks like it might get a much smaller fine as a result.*

**A.J.:** What they did, which was really sneaky, is they split off their U.S. offshore arm from the rest of their U.S. business, and they're saying, basically, that their offshore business doesn't have enough money — and it's just ludicrous.

I mean this is something oil companies do very, very often to avoid lawsuits, which is to just split off the offending arm of the company from the parent, and the parent is what we should be looking at, and the parent company, which is BP based in London, made over \$200 billion in revenue