

# Experts: Deepwater Drilling Ban May not be Needed

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WASHINGTON (AP) — A ban on deep-water drilling may no longer be needed now that the oil industry and the government appear to have developed safer drilling regimes, an expert panel said Thursday in a report to the presidential commission investigating the Gulf oil spill.

The report by the Bipartisan Policy Center is likely to boost oil industry groups and Gulf Coast lawmakers who are pushing to end the six-month drilling moratorium before its scheduled Nov. 30 expiration.

The report said the April explosion and fire on the Deepwater Horizon rig showed how unprepared government and industry were for a major spill.

The moratorium allowed time for both industry and government to make offshore drilling safer, the report said. The report praised steps taken by the Interior Department to increase safety of so-called blowout preventers and improve the integrity and control of deep-water wells.

"If industry is diligent in incorporating these requirements and DOI is vigilant in oversight and enforcement, we believe this new regime will provide an adequate margin of safety to responsibly allow the resumption of deep-water drilling in the Gulf of Mexico," the report said.

The oil spill commission asked the Washington-based policy center to look into the wisdom of using a moratorium to prevent spills in the aftermath of the BP disaster.

The report did not specify a timetable when the moratorium should be lifted, but Jason Grumet, the policy center's president, said in an interview that it should be lifted as soon as possible. Still, Grumet said it probably will take months for some operators to comply with the new requirements.

"All companies must be held to a consistent set of safety standards even if it delays or discourages some rigs from drilling in the Gulf," said Grumet, a co-author of the report.

Michael Bromwich, director of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement, said he appreciated the report's acknowledgment of work the agency has done to improve drilling oversight in the aftermath of the Gulf spill.

Bromwich said he is meeting with all sides of the drilling debate to consider how deep-water drilling can resume safely.

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"Before that, however, we need to ensure that workplace and drilling safety, spill response and containment issues are appropriately addressed by industry," he said.

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