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Why It's Safer to Drill in the 'Backyard'

Texas has had 102 oil and gas well blowouts since the start of 2006, without catastrophic consequences.

By [TERRY ANDERSON](#)

As oil continues to gush from BP's Macondo well and politicians posture, it is time for us to ask why we are drilling in such risky places when there is oil available elsewhere. The answer lies in the mantra NIMBY—"not in my back yard."

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BP was drilling for oil in 5,000 feet of water in the Mississippi Trench, more than 40 miles off the Louisiana coast. The site was leased in March 2008 from the Interior Department's Minerals Management Service. The area is one of an increasingly limited

number of places available for oil and gas development in the United States.

Because most private lands have been explored, public lands offer the most potential for oil and gas development. However, the NIMBY principle has significantly restricted development on those lands. According to 2008 Energy Department figures, nearly 80% of potentially oil-rich offshore lands are off limits to oil and gas development, and 60% of onshore lands are.

In my backyard, Sens. Max Baucus and Jon Tester have introduced a bill aimed at halting oil and gas exploration in the Flathead River drainage area near Glacier National Park. They have already pressured Chevron and ConocoPhillips to relinquish their exploration leases on the land, placing 75% of the leases off limits to development.



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And of course, there is the perennially contentious issue of drilling in ANWR, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The government estimates that the area could produce 750,000 barrels of oil per day.

Whether more exploration on federal lands would make the U.S. energy independent is debatable, but more onshore development would certainly be safer. In early June there was a blowout in western Pennsylvania. Did you see it on the nightly news? No, because it was

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Pumps draw petroleum from oil wells near a home.

capped in 16 hours. The Texas Railroad Commission, the state agency that regulates oil and gas production there, recorded 102 blowouts of oil and gas wells since

the start of 2006, resulting in 10 fires, 12 injuries, and two deaths. None of those made the nightly news either. The largest oil spill on Alaska's North Slope in 2006 was from a pipeline leak. It dumped only 6,357 barrels and had no disastrous impacts.

Drilling can be done with greater environmental sensitivity onshore. For many years the Audubon Society actually allowed oil companies to pump oil for its privately owned sanctuaries in Louisiana and Michigan, but did so with strict requirements on the oil companies so that they would not disturb the bird habitat.

Explaining the process years ago, one sanctuary manager said, "when the cranes punched in, the hard hats have to punch out." Until the Gulf blowout, Audubon was even considering leasing more land for development on the Louisiana coast under such strict terms.

When kids play baseball, there is a risk that windows will get broken. Playing on baseball fields rather than in sand lots, however, lowers the risk considerably. Putting so much onshore land off limits to oil and gas development is like closing baseball parks. More windows will be broken and more blowouts result where they are difficult to prevent and stop.

The blowout at BP's well has increased pressure from environmentalists and the Obama administration for greater emphasis on alternative energy sources. Even if they are successful, this will have a trivial impact on our unquenchable thirst for fossil fuel.

Enforcement of stricter safety regulation on deepwater drilling may reduce disasters like the current one in the Gulf. But the only real way to reduce the risk of catastrophic spills is to say yes to drilling in our backyard.

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