Statement of
Ranking Member Senator Susan M. Collins

Gulf Coast Catastrophe:
Assessing the Nation's Response to the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

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Eleven workers died after an explosion rocked and then sank the Deepwater Horizon oil drilling platform nearly four weeks ago in waters 45 miles off the Louisiana coast. I offer my deepest sympathies to those who lost loved ones in this horrific accident.

We know when this catastrophe began, but none of us knows when it will end. Today, 27 days after the fatal explosion and fire, oil continues to gush from the well-head nearly a mile below the surface of the Gulf of Mexico.

Despite recent successful efforts to siphon off a portion of the oil spewing from the broken pipe, the waters of the Gulf are slowly becoming a sea of crude oil. The expanding plume is menacing the fragile ecosystems in the Gulf, potentially damaging a vast array of sea life, the environment, and the futures of Americans who live and work along the Gulf Coast.

NOAA has estimated that each day some 5,000 barrels of oil are flowing into the waters of the Gulf, but recent estimates by other experts place that number as high as 70,000 barrels. Hundreds of federal officials, Coast Guard personnel, scientists, engineers, and officials from British Petroleum search for solutions to fix the urgent problem: How do we turn off this faucet of oil that is stuck open, nearly a mile under the water?

We have learned much about the explosion, fire, and challenging response efforts, but there are still too many unanswered questions.

At today's hearing, we will ask what the government and industry could have done differently to avoid this catastrophe. We will ask how the continuing damage to the Gulf of Mexico can be mitigated and how the spill can eventually be stopped.

As the Coast Guard Commandant has noted, the technological feats and ingenuity needed to stop the leak have parallels to the April 1970 rescue

mission for Apollo 13. It took urgent, coordinated, and creative actions to bring Apollo 13's three astronauts safely home to Earth.

In responding to this catastrophe, our nation faces a similar Herculean engineering task—but this time in a deep ocean environment that is dark, cold, and unforgiving.

There are some 90 rigs drilling in the Gulf of Mexico right now, providing 1.7 million barrels of oil a day, or nearly one-third of total U.S. production.

According to the federal Minerals Management Service (MMS), only 0.7 percent of active drilling platforms are searching for oil in waters deeper than 1,000 feet, yet 52 percent of all leases are in those deep waters. Clearly, companies believe there is much promise in deepwater drilling; therefore, there could be a rapid expansion in this area in coming years. In light of the Deepwater Horizon disaster, we must examine whether we need special requirements for drilling operations in these challenging conditions.

MMS has the responsibility for reviewing and approving oil spill response plans for drilling conducted on offshore rigs like the Deepwater Horizon. I would like to know what level of preparedness MMS requires of companies seeking to drill in this hazardous deepwater environment.

For the Coast Guard to effectively perform its statutory role in marine environmental protection, it must work closely with MMS and the private sector in order to be prepared for a worst case scenario.

To that end, I was surprised to learn that there currently exists no requirement for MMS to share oil spill response plans with the Coast Guard.

How can that be? It seems to me that mandating concurrent Coast Guard approval of these plans is a commonsense change that the government should make immediately.

Today, we will hear more about the Department of Homeland Security's coordination of the response to the ongoing spill. The federal government and private sector have committed substantial resources to respond to this oil spill, and these efforts will certainly continue. Concerns have been raised, however, regarding the adequacy and timeliness of resources committed to this effort in the initial days of the blowout.

Furthermore, with the Administration's proposed $75 million cut to the Coast Guard's budget, it is questionable whether the Coast Guard can maintain sufficient capabilities to respond to this and future disasters, along with performing its myriad other missions. Surely, this catastrophe should prompt the Administration to reconsider that ill-conceived budget cut.

Finally, the private sector must accept responsibility for this failure of modern engineering.

This oil spill, when it finally concludes, will be recorded as an epic catastrophe, whose impacts are likely to be felt for a long time to come.

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