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Conference in Cuba addresses questions on offshore safety

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By [Bob Tippee](#)
Editor

Notwithstanding improvements made after the Macondo tragedy of 2010, questions remain about the safety of offshore drilling and production, said speakers at a conference this month in Havana. Many relate to technology and culture.

Capping stacks, for example, now represent vital tools of emergency well control. Yet they require time to deliver and install and can't work in all accidents, pointed out speakers at the event, Safe Seas-Clean Seas, organized by Hunt Petty LP.

"I would not want to bet my career on those technologies on every spill," said retired Coast Guard Rear Adm. James A. Watson, president of the American Bureau of Shipping Americas Division and past director of the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement. Watson served as federal on-scene coordinator of Macondo responses during June 1-July 14, 2010.

"You still need to drill the relief well," he said.

Development of the capping stack that eventually controlled the Macondo well was a "major engineering feat," noted Quenton Dokken, president and chief executive officer of Gulf of Mexico Foundation Inc., adding, "We should have had that engineered in advance, not after the fact."

Citing "significant advancements and planning" implemented in the US since the Macondo disaster, Dokken addressed the event theme by asking: "Are plans being formulated to expand that same planning and preparation into Cuba's and Mexico's territorial seas?"

Raul R. Costa Gravalosa of the Civil Defense National Staff answered for Cuba by describing a detailed, three-tier system based on a "safety cases" approach modeled on the UK's preparedness system rather than the more-prescriptive US regime.

Jay Hakes, former administrator of the US Energy Information Administration and director for research and policy for the presidential BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Commission, provided a harsh reminder of the importance, whatever the regulatory system, of culture.

Hakes called the Deepwater Horizon semisubmersible, which caught fire and sank over the Macondo well, a "marvel of engineering." Still, he said, some gauges related to safety were so obsolete they required manual calculations.

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