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For Many Lawmakers, The BP Spill Offered Chance To Pitch A Constituent's Solution

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WASHINGTON -- The explosion of the Deepwater Horizon rig last spring and the subsequent months-long flow of oil into the Gulf of Mexico thrust much of the federal government into crisis-response mode.

For several members of Congress and some state-level lawmakers, however, the spill offered an opportunity to do what comes naturally: go to bat for constituents and businesses in their communities.

Dozens of internal emails released by the Department of the Interior in response to a Freedom of Information Act request show that in the weeks and months following the BP spill, lawmakers jumped at the chance to pitch both obvious and out-of-the-box ways to stop or clean up the oil in the gulf.

Some of the pitches came from legislators directly affected by the crisis; others, from states far removed. But all had a common thread: an individual in their district had either conceived of a solution or had a company that could help perform, or benefit from, the work.

On May 26, for example, Illinois state Rep. Donald Moffitt (R) sent a letter to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar as well as BP America, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson, requesting that they consider a solution being offered by one of his constituents.

"Simply stated," Moffitt wrote, "why can't B.P. insert the equivalent of an industrial strength 'balloon' into the leaking tube of the off-shore drilling operation, allow it to inflate with some liquid until the balloon would seal off the flow of oil."

"This would," he added, "be like a reverse industrial strength angioplasty."

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A call to Moffitt's office to see if anyone followed up on the suggestion wasn't immediately returned. But sending the letter was a no-lose situation for the state representative, whose constituent, B.J. Price, would likely be grateful for the lobbying even if Interior ignored him.

While an industrial-strength, reverse-angioplasty balloon may have been the most unconventional constituent contraption lawmakers pitched to help with the BP crisis, it was far from the only one. On May 27, Rep. Bill Cassidy (R-La.) wrote Salazar asking for a direct response to a constituent bewildered by the government's refusal to utilize or certify a product made by a company for whom he consulted.

"The British Petroleum accident which has turned into national crises [sic] catastrophe can be resolved and be resolved with the discovery and utilization of OIL SPILL EATER II," the constituent, David C. Fa-Kouri of the Louisiana Economic Foundation, wrote. A letter the constituent had sent to Vice President Joe Biden's office was enclosed. "I need your help to get OIL SPILL EATER II approved for immediate use with BP, RRT, and or the US Coast Guard. This product is being blocked for use for unknown reasons which I cannot answer. The same can be said for why and how come our US government agencies have authorized dispersants like Corexit 9527 which is deadly toxin, which was protocol by the RRT and EPA. I do not have time for blame; I need OSEII to be utilized to save what can be saved."

A call to the Dallas-based Oil Spill Eater International Corporation to see if the product ended being deployed was also not immediately returned.

On May 21, Maine's two Republican senators, Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins, wrote Salazar as well, pitching Packgen, an Auburn, Maine-based company that specialized in oil boom material "and could provide critical assets as our national rushes to protect our coastlines throughout the Gulf Coast."

On May 28, Rep. Thaddeus McCotter (R-Mich.), wrote Christopher Mansour, the Interior Department's director of Congressional and Legislative Affairs, on behalf of a constituent whose company, Supply Team LLC, "could help absorb oil in the Gulf, preventing it from sinking to the bottom."

On May 19, Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-Calif.) wrote Mansour asking that his office "appropriately" address a suggestion raised by his constituent "regarding his suggestions with the Deepwater Horizon oil spill." That suggestion: that the department "build a Threading Bolt big enough to surround the pipe and Thread it" in addition to building a "fitting with an attached hose to completely seal the pipe that will lead to a barge at the surface."

On May 25, now-retired Rep. Dennis Moore (D-Kan.) wrote Salazar on behalf of a constituent who had suggested that the government employ fishermen from the area to skim oil from the gulf.

What purpose the latter two letters served is not entirely clear. BP had already hired fishermen to help with the cleanup, often with consternation about payment and safety standards. As for the expertise of Hunter's constituent, the congressman provided no credentials along with his letter to Mansour.

That said, the series of documents obtained by The Huffington Post provide a window into the all-hands-on-deck mentality that accompanied the aftermath of the spill, as well as the all-politics-is-local mindset that kept guiding lawmakers during the crisis.

None of the lobbying efforts made by the aforementioned lawmakers appeared to result in work contracts. But each accomplished a more fundamentally political objective: endearing the lawmaker to his or her constituent or company.

"If you look at the end result, the answer would be no [we didn't get the work]," Packgen's owner, John Lapoint said, "but was it the right thing? I think it was because given the circumstances at the time and the urgencies of the spill. It just didn't result in the outcome."

Supply Team LLC founder Roger Avie was even more grateful even if his company didn't get work down in the gulf.

"I was very appreciative of Representative McCotter," he said. "But to answer your question, we did not get feedback and we still have the booms that work better than they have and would have captured more oil."

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