

# How BP's \$18.7-billion oil-spill settlement could help the Gulf of Mexico

Marine scientist Don Boesch on the fight to restore ecosystems damaged by the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

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Donald Boesch.

Oil company [BP](#) agreed on 2 July to pay US\$18.7 billion to settle civil lawsuits over the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. An estimated 3.19 million barrels of oil poured into the Gulf during the months-long crisis, the largest marine spill in US history.

The payment will add to \$14 billion that BP said it had already paid in claims, advances and settlements related to the spill.

Donald Boesch, a marine scientist and president of the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science in Cambridge, spoke to *Nature* about BP's settlement and what it will mean for restoration efforts and scientific studies in the Gulf. Boesch served on the National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling. He was a witness in the US government's lawsuit against BP for violating provisions of the Clean Water Act, and has advised the National Academy of Science's US\$500-million Gulf Research Program.

## **What do you think of the settlement?**

The good thing from my perspective, with an interest in using the resources for meaningful environmental restoration, is that it removes a lot of uncertainty and gives an idea of what is available and how it can be used — rather than having that go on without a clear end.

Now our challenge is to make sure we don't blow it and that we use a scientifically sound basis for design and implementation of projects, account for outcomes and advance smart restoration while also using this opportunity to grow our scientific capacity.

That could have gone on for many more years, as the NRDA [the Natural Resource Damage Assessment process, which calculates the environmental costs of oil spills] is wont to do. So this resolves that and therefore provides a substantial amount of money in a time frame that could be very helpful.

**If you had the opportunity to decide how this money would be spent, what would you do?**

There are a lot of plans on the table. Right after the spill, even when the spill was going on, the president appointed a commission to answer this very question. They came up with a report: a comprehensive strategy for ecosystem restoration in the Gulf. I think it got the big things right.

It mentioned that we have a crisis of the deterioration of the Mississippi Delta that has resulted from a whole bunch of things: oil and gas activity, flood protection, navigation. We have this very large dead zone in the Gulf that is the result of the industrial agriculture that has fed the nation and helps feed the world.

We have ideas and plans in place to address those issues, but they have lacked the resources. So I would think, let's first look at the proposals and plans we have that have gone through the process of scientific and public review, and see if we can get those done and implemented.

**If you look back at past efforts in responding to oil spills, notably the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska in 1989, it does not seem that restoration efforts have a good track record.**

It is challenging to think long term. And once these events are over, memory starts to fade. In the Exxon Valdez case, resources that folks thought were available, all of a sudden through the legal process were diminished [by a 2008 Supreme Court decision].

But the scale of this amount of money — when you add the additional money that BP has already committed under early restoration and the NRDA and the criminal settlement — the scale of \$20 billion is really unprecedented.

One of the other challenges we have is that it is not entirely clear that we have the process in place to use the best and most rigorous science in a timely way to ensure the best sustainable outcome. That is a major challenge not only for the people in charge of spending those funds, but also for the scientific community to step up to the plate and avoid the stereotype of scientists coming up with a long list of things we don't know and just saying we need more research.

**Do you have concerns about how this money will be allocated? It is such a large amount.**

Yes, I do. But this agreement is phased over time. This is not an amount that will arrive quickly. In certain ways that is a good thing, because you have to think carefully about spending the money you have, and it has to be in the context of a bigger plan of where you are going ultimately with the whole effort.

**Are there enough scientists who can do these studies?**

We had a huge amount of investment in science to try to understand the impacts of this spill when it was going on, and since then. That includes the \$500 million that BP committed in 2010 that is now funding the Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative. That has engaged a large group of scientists from within the Gulf and outside the area, and they are focused by and large on understanding the impacts of the blowout.

If you go to some of their meetings, you will see a whole new generation of graduate students that have been brought in to work on this. So in a way, it has been a shot in the arm in terms of that part of the pipeline.

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