

Important Meeting on Gulf Oil Crises

Howard Kessler, Chairman, Wakulla County Board of County Commissioners

Yesterday, June 23rd, I traveled to Ft. Walton Beach and joined Secretary of the Department of Environmental Protection, Mike Soles; United States Coast Guard Captain, Steven Poulin, Incident Commander; Coast Guard Deputy Commander, Joe Boudrow; BP Vice President, Bryant Chapman; BP Claims Representative, Ben Ziker; officers from Florida Association of Counties and commissioners, administrators and emergency directors from Bay, Escambia, Franklin, Gulf, Okaloosa, Wakulla and Walton counties.

Problems in the current response to the Gulf Oil Catastrophe were identified and discussed. County commissioners pointed to significant problems in the incident command response and the apparent lack of county input in responding to the protection of Florida's coastal environment. The commissioners explained that local governments were best aware of the most sensitive areas that needed protection and they also were best aware of the resources available at the local level. Concern as to rapid local response and assurance that BP would repay the expenses fronted by the counties were also expressed.

The Coast Guard informed the counties that they were sensitive to those concerns and Coast Guard liaisons were being deployed to counties so that a presence would be established in our counties and more immediate information and feedback through the chain of command would be established. Juliette Kayyem, Assistant Secretary of Homeland Security, was at the table giving Washington, D.C.'s perspective.

I along with the Commissioner from Franklin County emphasized that Wakulla and Franklin Counties began a different coastline of Florida. I explained that Wakulla county's shoreline was not one of pristine beaches but one of marshes and sensitive estuaries and that the battle for our shore needed to be fought and won out in the Gulf before the oil got to the shore. I asked for many more skimmers to be deployed to the Gulf. Secretary of DEP, Mike Soles agreed.

In addition to concerns in command chain and response, concerns as to the claims process and BP's commitment to repay the money fronted by the counties were discussed. Some clarification and progress were made in these areas although more needs to be accomplished.

Florida Association of Counties organized the meeting and I think most around the table found the time and effort to get to Ft. Walton Beach and participate in the meeting worthwhile. I greatly appreciated the balanced and clear approach of Secretary Mike Soles in responding to the significant issues facing Florida and to the significant frustration and tension that were expressed by many county officials during this meeting.

My assessment; the meeting was worthwhile and was a positive step in improving local participation in the decision-making process. Local participation in decision-making is very important in best protecting our natural resources.