

Interview:

NRDC's Frances Beinecke

Speaks at Cary Institute April 7

By Carola Lott

On Thursday, April 7, Frances Beinecke, a member of the National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling, will speak at the Cary Institute about what caused the disaster and what the oil industry, federal agencies, and Congress can do to protect Americans in the future.

Beinecke, the president of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), graduated from Yale as a member of the first class that included women. She received her Masters Degree from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies before interning at NRDC three years after John Adams founded the organization in 1970. After a leave of absence to raise her three daughters, Beinecke returned to NRDC in 1990, and eight years later became its executive director. In 2006 she became the second president of the organization when Adams retired.

Beinecke has served on the board of Yale University and currently is on the Board of the World Resources Institute

and Wave Hill, a public garden in the Bronx. She is married to Paul Elston, with whom she co-founded the New York League of Conservation Voters.

Several weeks ago *The Millbrook Independent* spoke to Beinecke.

TMI: First, just how much oil does the United States get from off shore drilling?

FB: *Twenty-three percent of our domestic production comes from the gulf.*

TMI: What did the president's commission conclude about last year's oil spill in the Gulf?

FB: *Our view is that it was a systemic problem. The way the industry operates offshore, not only in the gulf but around the world, is not at a level of safety and risk analysis that we would expect from such a sophisticated industry.*

TMI: What steps did the commission recommend the oil industry, federal agencies, and Congress take to protect Americans in the future?

FB: *The commission's report has three general areas of recommendations: what the interior department can do using its existing legal authority; what area requires congressional action; and what area would require initiative on the part of the oil industry.*

TMI: What steps has the Interior Department taken so far to implement your recommendations?

FB: *The interior department has to have much higher standards for how they should operate and stronger oversight. They have already taken quite a few of the steps that we recommend. In fact*

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they have probably gone 75 percent down the road of things that we've recommended. However, without congressional action to give them more resources and additional authority, they cannot do the job that is required to ensure the safety of human life and the marine resources of the Gulf. They don't have the capacity, or the technical expertise. They have gone a long way with what they can do with existing resources but it is not adequate.

TMI: You say industry should self-police. What is the likelihood of that happening?

FB: *The Gulf of Mexico is a public resource, and the oil is a public resource. Because industry is exploring a public resource, the government has the primary responsibility to make certain this is done properly. In addition, we recommend that the industry create a safety institute that would insure that they are constantly improving best practices and sharing them amongst each other. However the first line of defense is oversight by the government.*

TMI: What has finally been the real damage to the gulf?

FB: *It's too early to tell. The nearly five million barrels of oil that were gushing into the gulf got into the water column and got into the zooplankton and the phytoplankton. How that will affect marine life over time is being assessed right now. There was immediate damage to the coastal shore lands, to the wetlands and to the beaches—650 miles had some kind of oil damage. The area has the largest fishery in the country after Alaska and a big tourist industry. The beaches of Mississippi, Alabama and Florida are a major economic resource [and] they were not only actually damaged by the oil but also damaged as far as public perception goes, both of which resulted in severe economic harm.*

TMI: There has been a lot in the news recently about hydrofracking by the natural gas industry. Could you talk about that?

FB: *The natural gas industry made a very concerted effort particularly during the Bush era under Dick Cheney's energy programs, to get exemptions from major environmental laws including The Safe Drinking Water Act, The Clean Water Act and the Superfund Law, and they succeeded before the Marcellus shale became a known opportunity. We and others didn't know this threat was coming, and we weren't as vigilant as we should have been but we're certainly vigilant now. At the moment the industry is not adequately regulated and each state is trying to figure out how to put regulations in place.*

[The EPA is now making] a very specific assessment of what the drinking water contamination issues are with fracking, especially with the waste water that's getting into rivers that are the main source of drinking water for major metropolitan areas all over the Northeast, particularly Pennsylvania. And of course we're very concerned about what the consequences are to the New York City drinking water supply if fracking should proceed in the Catskills. In New York State they're doing an environmental impact review right now. The question is whether that is adequate and whether they are providing the level of analysis that is really required as more and more data comes out. These issues are growing in severity and significance. Our number one aim at NRDC is to ensure that this industry has the kind of oversight and regulation that every other industry has. If the gas industry feels this is such an opportunity, they should be ensuring there are adequate environmental safeguards and adequate public health protections, but they're not though.

TMI: You have said our nation is addicted to oil. What can we do to reduce our consumption?

FB: *The number one thing that needs to happen is that we need to maximize our energy efficiency. We should have the most fuel-efficient cars, and we need to move to hybrid electric as quickly as possible. Two years ago this April the president increased our mpg café standards to 35 miles per gallon. Now the administration has another opportunity to ratchet those up for the post 2016 period. That needs to happen. We also need to maximize our investments in public transportation so that people have alternatives.*

In the power sector we need to maximize our investment in efficiencies. We think we could get as much as a 40 percent savings from electricity use if buildings were retrofitted to be more efficient—and not only the buildings themselves but everything in the buildings. Appliances need to be more efficient, electronics need to be more efficient—and they can be. There are huge savings and it's the fastest, cheapest way to realize energy reductions.

Wind and solar are coming in to the market place [and] they are more and more competitive. In Denmark 20 percent of their electricity comes from renewables, largely wind. In Germany, where they made a huge commitment to solar, they have a climate much like ours here in the Northeast and yet they see the benefit of solar investment. So if you put in efficiency and you put in wind and solar you can get real reductions and real input into the power grid. What is so disappointing for us is that the fossil fuel industry really owns the energy policy in this country, and trying to shift it to a different future is politically very, very difficult.

TMI: What other issues do you consider important?

FB: *I think everybody needs to realize that at the same time we're working very hard to advance energy solutions, there is a huge risk that Congress will roll back existing environmental safeguards. We're in a very tough fight in Congress now where many Republicans are looking to roll back authority under the Clean Air Act. We have to hold onto what we have and not allow those roll backs on the Clean Air Act authority, and then we need to move forward with solutions.*

TMI: What can ordinary citizens accomplish?

FB: *I think that being active is absolutely critical. No one can assume that clean air and clean water are just going to happen without a fight. I think both the fracking issue and the rollbacks on the Clean Air Act are evidence of that. I think people need to let their local elected officials know what kind of environment they expect in the 21st century. They can do it over the Internet, they can join organizations, they can go to town meetings with their local elected officials. It starts in communities.*

I hope the president takes the lead in moving us down a clean energy path. We need him to be a strong voice for why it's important for the environment and why there's value for the economy. We've spent a lot of time examining how the two come together. Environmental protection creates jobs – it can power the economy. Making fuel-efficient cars, making wind turbines, installing transmission lines, retrofitting green buildings all create a lot of jobs.



Frances Beinecke. Photo courtesy of the National Resources Defense Council.

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