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U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
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March 30, 2012

TODD YOUNG
CHIEF OF STAFF

The Honorable Ken Salazar
Secretary
Department of Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Salazar:

About 150 miles off the coast of Scotland in the North Sea, a drilling platform (known as the Elgin platform) currently is leaking natural gas. The leak began on Sunday, March 25, as workers were closing off a well, in a scenario similar to BP's Deepwater Horizon spill. The energy company Total, which owns the Elgin platform, did not locate the source of the leak until several days after it occurred and is now "preparing to sink two relief wells... in parallel with a plugging operation," according to a news report.¹ There are also fears that the gas, which is more flammable than oil, could catch on fire and cause an explosion and trigger oil in the well to leak.

This incident is in foreign waters, but I am interested in whether sufficient protections are in place to prevent a similar or even more serious incident in U.S. waters. As you know, Total also does business in the United States, holding ownership stake in more than 200 offshore drilling leases.

I therefore ask that you please provide a written response to the following questions:

1. Has the Department of Interior looked into Total's leak in the North Sea? If so, what have you learned about the source of the leak, why it happened, and the adequacy of Total's pre-incident precautions and post-incident response?
2. What is the safety record of U.S. operations in which Total has ownership stake over the last five years? Please list any spills or leaks, the amount and cause of those spills or leaks, any violations of safety standards, and any penalties imposed for those violations.
3. Have similar gas leaks occurred in U.S. waters? Please list any such leaks over the last five years. For each leak, please indicate the duration of the leak, the estimated amount

¹ Agence France-Presse, "Total plans relief wells to stop North Sea gas leak," March 30, 2012.

of natural gas that was released, the amount of time it took to halt the leak, whether the leak caused any damage to property, injuries, or fatalities, and any fines or penalties levied on the owners or operations of the rig or platform that was the subject of the leak.

4. What protections are now in place to prevent a similar or more serious incident and how are they enforced?
5. Are there standards or protections in place to prevent fire and explosions and protect workers should an offshore gas leak occur? And if so, how are those protections enforced?

Thank you for your assistance in responding to this inquiry. I ask that you please respond by April, 2012. Should you have any questions, please contact Reece Rushing of the House Natural Resources Committee Democratic staff at 202-226-4627.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
Ranking Member
Committee on Natural Resources