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# United States Senate

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June 21, 2010

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

Dear Secretary Salazar:

During your recent testimony you mentioned the research your department is conducting on oil spill response technology at the Oil and Hazardous Materials Simulated Environmental Test Tank (OHMSETT), located in Leonardo, New Jersey. Your testimony prompted me to ask my staff to try to arrange a tour of the facility for me. My staff was informed there was "a hole in the tank," that the facility was not operational, and that it would not be up and running again until July. As the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill continues to spill up to 2.5 million gallons of oil per day into the Gulf of Mexico, I was shocked to learn that the facility the Interior Department uses to research how to respond to oil spills is out of commission. I would like to know how this happened and what the Interior Department's plan is to get this facility back in operating order as soon as possible.

As you know, the OHMSETT facility is the federal government's only facility to test equipment and different strategies to respond to oil spills in a controlled marine environment. At least it was when its water tank had water in it.

I believe that the fact that this facility is inoperable during the nation's largest oil spill is indicative of a complacency and lack of investment in oil spill response technologies. In 1989, after the Exxon Valdez disaster, a witness representing the American Petroleum Institute, Michael Kinworthy, testified to the House Subcommittee on Natural Resources, Agriculture Research, and Environment that "a realistic appraisal of the U.S. response to catastrophic spills recognizes that no effective containment of such spills has been accomplished." On Tuesday, Rex Tillerson, CEO of Exxon Mobil, testified that "when these things [oil spills] happen, we are not well-equipped to deal with them." Over the last 20 years nothing has changed. The industry and even the government has substantially invested in new technologies to drill in deeper water and deeper into the Earth, but little has been invested in safety or oil spill response and clean-up. Apparently not even enough to keep water in OHMSETT's testing tank.

I ask you to direct your Department to make all necessary repairs to the OHMSETT facility without delay. I also ask that you seriously consider what new investment is needed so we are not cleaning up oil spills with technology from the 1950's.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robert Menendez". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and a long, sweeping underline.

ROBERT MENENDEZ  
United States Senator