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# Tony Hayward: Public saw us as 'fumbling and incompetent'

Ex-BP boss says when oil spill hit, BP was forced to make up disaster response as it went along

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**Terry Macalister**The Guardian, Thursday 11 November 2010

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Tony Hayward, ex-BP boss. Photograph: Toby Melville/Reuters

The former boss of [BP](#) admitted last night that the [oil](#) giant had been completely unprepared for the Gulf of Mexico accident that nearly sank it financially.

When the crisis hit, BP was forced to make up its oil spill disaster response as it went along, something that made it look "fumbling" and "incompetent" in the eyes of the public, said [Tony Hayward](#).

"Embarrassingly we found ourselves having to improvise on prime-time TV and slap bang in the middle of the glare of the global media.

"Our efforts involved amazing feats of engineering – tasks completed in days that would normally take months, numerous major innovations with lasting benefits.

"But because every move was scrutinised around the world, what the public thought they saw was fumbling and incompetence."

The admissions came in a speech to students at the Cambridge Union in which Hayward went on to claim corporate complacency spreads across an industry that has repeatedly denied these allegations when made by environmental critics.

"For me perhaps the most shattering reflection was just how much havoc can be wreaked by a single accident in one small part of a giant company's operations – an accident moreover that all our corporate deliberations had told us simply could not happen," he said. "For BP this was the ultimate low-probability, high-impact event – a black swan to borrow a term used in the financial crisis."

But BP was not the only company at risk from such an event, he added. "The whole industry had been lulled into a sense of false security after 20 years of drilling in deep water without a serious accident, till now," said Hayward, in criticism which will be

challenged by oil rivals who have tried to distance themselves from the behaviour of the British oil group.

Hayward admitted the contingency plans drawn up by the company were completely inadequate.

"While we were able to mount a massive response to contain and disperse the oil on the surface we did not have the equipment to contain and disperse on the seabed. In fact the equipment had never been designed or built. It simply did not exist," he said.

Hayward's comments will ignite debate in environmental and political circles about the oil industry's fitness to operate, especially in pristine environments such as the Arctic.

The oil industry has always argued that safety come firsts – but Hayward's comments seriously undermine this claim.

Environmentalists have long challenged the responsible nature of big oil and politicians too have expressed concern since the April 20 accident involving the Deepwater Horizon rig which had a massive blow out killing 11 workers and causing the worst environmental accident in US history.

Barack Obama banned deep water drilling in the gulf for a period but has just given the industry permission to restart.

In Europe a debate still rages inside the Europe Union about whether there should be tougher controls on oil companies drilling wells in areas such as West of Shetlands. The European Energy Commissioner proposed tougher measures but the moves were headed off by a UK government that insists its own safety regulations are among the toughest in the world.

Hayward was removed from his post as BP chief executive on 1 October. He is now a non-executive director of TNK-BP, the UK/Russian joint venture while his place has been taken at the BP group by a first American to take the post: Bob Dudley. Hayward, vilified in the US media over the spill, has been on a PR offensive to try and salvage some of his reputation.

He told the BBC in a documentary screened on Tuesday night that he would have needed to study drama at RADA rather than geology at Edinburgh University if he had wanted to perform better in front of a hostile US public.

He has repeatedly been accused by critics of making insensitive or unfortunate comments but told the BBC that he sincerely believed that nothing he said would have changed the outcome for BP.

- This article was amended on 11 November 2010. The original referred to a speech to students at Cambridge University. This has been corrected.