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## Oil leaks, fires & explosions

Steels are sagging, valves sticking, fillers over-filling, pipes leaking, gauges sticking. Safety procedures fail. Alert systems remain stubbornly silent.

It shouldn't be this way. Every Chief Executive will tell you that their company's number one priority is safety. Building and planning regulations have succeeded in minimizing fire hazards. Risk assessments inform every conceivable area of health and safety at work and play. Yet right now our energy industry infrastructure is suffering a series of catastrophic shocks that is starting to look unstoppable.

Some of these disasters are baffling, not least because they are happening at a time of soaring prices and massive oil wealth - a time when the pressure to cut corners ought to be minimal. Take the investigation into the 'UK's biggest peace time explosion', the Buncefield explosion of December 2005. Investigators are unable to explain why the greatest blast damage to buildings was in the vicinity of the nearby open air car parks. The report states that 'The magnitude of the overpressures generated in the open areas of the ... car parks is not consistent with current understanding of vapour cloud explosions'. This assertion sheds doubt on the validity of the reports own reading of events\*1.

In New York in February 2003, residents were woken up 30 miles away by a massive blast at the oil and gas facility on Staten Island\*2. An explosion at the Ghislenghien plant in Belgium in July 2004 'sent huge fireballs into the air, flung bodies hundreds of yards, burned two factories and left a large crater between them'\*3. The Texas City refinery blast, where 14 people died in March 2005, was punctuated by a 'sonic boom' and 'The aftermath of the blast left a gaping hole in the earth, while chunks of charred metal littered the ground'\*4. Then the explosion on Rough off the Yorkshire coast in February 2006 was so damaging that the gas storage facility was shut down for 3 months\*5. Though barely reported, this presented the most serious threat to the UK's winter gas supplies in a very long time. Local authorities in England were warned to prepare for shortages. But the shocks continued. Pipeline corrosion in March 2006 allowed some 267,000 gallons of oil to spill out onto the Alaskan ice\*6. The blast from the chemical works at Billingham on Teeside in May 2006 was heard 20 miles away\*7. Then, on 7 August 2006, the temporary closure of the Prudhoe Bay oil facility was announced. Due to rust. In response, oil prices in London climbed to record highs of \$78 per barrel\*8.

Old age? Corrosion - networks and facilities allowed to fall into disrepair? Is this the obvious conclusion to draw from this



accelerating sequence of energy industry shocks? Or, is there enough evidence here to suggest a pattern – a series of rude awakenings?

Sources:

- \*1. The Buncefield Investigation - Third Progress Report, p15
- \*2. Two dead in New York blast
- \*3. Deadly gas explosion rocks Belgium
- \*4. Texas oil plant blast 'kills 14', BBC News, 24 March 2005
- \*5. Catastrophic failure blamed for Rough gas blast of 16 Feb 2006, Offshore247.com
- \*6. BP faces Alaska oil spill probe, BBC News, 8 June 2006
- \*7. Nitrogen manufacturer to investigate Teesside explosion 1 June 2006, The Guardian
- \*8. Oil Prices Rise after field in Alaska is shut, 7 August 2006, New York Times

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