

By Sam Hemingway, Burlington Free Press

Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., said Friday that the massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is an environmental tragedy that he hopes will accelerate the push for renewable energy and bring the "drill, baby, drill" advocates of off-shore drilling to their senses.

"Our continuing reliance of the dirty fuels of the 19th century is coming back to cause us real economic harm, real environmental harm," Welch said. "My hope is that this event is going to make it real apparent to folks that there are significant consequences if we continue to rely on fossil fuels."

Welch spoke after he and seven other members of Congress flew over the spill site 50 miles off the shore of Louisiana on Friday afternoon and were briefed by officials with the U.S. Coast Guard and BP PLC, the operator of the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig that exploded April 20, triggering the spill.

"It is an extraordinarily, deeply depressing site," Welch said, describing what he saw. "The deep blue water suddenly has these fingers, as though from the flames of hell, really, that is massive amounts of oil that have been treated with dispersant and has this oddly orange color."

Welch said oil-laden dispersants were like floating islands on the sea, some of them 500 yards wide and stretching out as far as the eye could see. In other places, closer to shore, he saw a sheen of oil on the water's surface.

Welch said he was impressed with the efforts being made by the Coast Guard and BP to stop gushing oil leak from the damaged rig and mitigate the environmental damage to the Gulf coast and wildlife, but said the massive nature of the catastrophe was breathtaking.

Welch and the bipartisan House delegation visited the spill site in advance of hearings Wednesday by the oversight subcommittee of the House Energy & Commerce Committee of

which Welch is a member.

"We have to get to the bottom of what happened," he said. "This is an event that BP said would never happen and it did, and then they said they had several systems in place to stop the damage if the impossible happened, and each one of them failed."