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The technology used to extract oil from reservoirs in offshore drilling – particularly in deep water – has fallen behind engineers' ability to find and drill for that oil, raising safety concerns.

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Research on deep-water equipment lagging

Dramatic advances in seismic technology have allowed scientists to find remoter reserves more easily, says Hans Juvkam-Wold, professor emeritus in petroleum engineering at Texas A&M University.

Graphic
Poor ratings for subsea equipment
Subsea equipment ratings have significantly lagged other oilfield categories since 2005.

But investment in new equipment technology to extract the harder-to-get oil has not kept pace, says James Pappas, vice president for technology at the Research Partnership to Secure Energy for America.

For example, the harsher, less predictable conditions in deep water can have an effect on sensitive fluids that are crucial to drilling, meaning that alternatives need to be developed, says Mr. Pappas.

Moreover, the deep sea remains one of the least explored places on earth, meaning that engineers must rely on estimates in devising deep-water equipment that will be used in environments that can vary greatly depending on where and how deep a company is drilling.

In deeper waters, thick layers of impermeable salt common in the Gulf of Mexico can make the process more complex in nearly every phase. Salt is tougher to drill through, it can be a sign of oil under higher amounts of pressure, and it can add to corrosion of subsea equipment.

Still low market demand

Because deep-water drilling is still a small fraction of overall drilling, the market for better

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equipment is small, says Iraj Ershaghi, director of the petroleum engineering program at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

Additionally, the oil industry is generally conservative when it comes to adopting technologically enhanced equipment, he said. Many in the industry feel new devices take away from the sense of familiarity and comfort with the equipment they already work with, and thus increase risk.

But there is a realization that the lack of quality deep-water extraction equipment needs to be addressed. While subsea equipment has improved in recent years, "it still may not be quite good enough to get the job done safely," says EnergyPoint's Mr. Sheridan.

Others feel the equipment is adequate, for now, but that new research is needed for the future.

"Equipment-wise, we are OK now," says Dr. Ershaghi. But "it's getting tougher and tougher and tougher [to extract subsea oil]. We need better technology."

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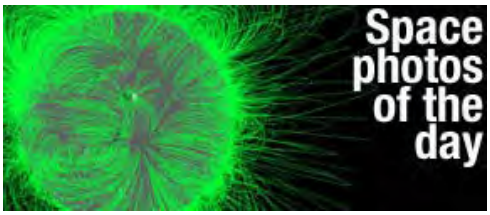

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'Wolf man' Doug Smith studies Yellowstone's restored predators

'Nature without wolves is not nature,' says the field biologist and project leader

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