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Oil Spill's Impact on Gulf Seafood Remains Uncertain

By KIM SEVERSON

THE oil from the broken well 40 miles off the Louisiana coast keeps getting closer to the plate.

Researchers at the University of Southern Mississippi earlier this month found oil droplets in the tiny blue crabs that feed much of the larger sea life in the coastal gulf waters. And in what might be worse news, at least psychologically, oil from the spill has started to creep into Lake Pontchartrain, the sacred seafood pantry of New Orleans.

The lake, on the northern edge of New Orleans, is connected to the Gulf of Mexico by a series of waterways. It's a long way from the gulf shore, and since the explosion in April optimistic local eaters have believed that the lake, and its plentiful seafood, would stay clean.

But now, no one knows how much oil might reach the lake and, on a broader level, whether increased monitoring by state and federal officials will keep the gulf seafood industry from collapsing.

"We just don't know what it means, and that's what's driving us crazy," said Ralph Brennan, whose family runs 12 restaurants, 9 of which are in New Orleans.

Customers seem to feel the same way. Owners of restaurants across the country say diners are asking regularly why gulf seafood remains on the menu. And a recent national study by the [University of Minnesota](#) found that 44 percent of the people surveyed would not eat seafood from the gulf.

Although some scientists say it is too soon to know how the oil and efforts to clean it up will impact gulf seafood, state and federal officials say more testing is going on in the gulf now than ever before. No tainted seafood has entered the market, officials say, and they maintain that extensive testing and aggressive fishery closures should keep the supply clean and, with the exception of some gulf oysters, plentiful.

Within days of the spill, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the [Food and Drug Administration](#) began catching seafood to look for the carcinogenic components of crude oil, and federal and state officials, who are responsible for different portions of the gulf, began closing areas to fishing.

The only contaminated fish sample to have been found so far came from an area closed to fishing, said Lisa Desfosse, director of the NOAA Fisheries Mississippi labs, who is coordinating the collection effort in the gulf.

The federal government has closed 35 percent of the gulf waters under its jurisdiction to fishing. Officials in Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and Florida have also closed hundreds of miles of water along the coast. The idea is to make the margins around the spill so wide that even areas several miles from the site are off limits.

"The main tool is that closed area, that red line," said John Stein, the head of the NOAA Deepwater Horizon oil spill seafood-safety program, who spoke with reporters in Pascagoula, Miss., last week. "No fishing inside that red line."

Although the NOAA regularly keeps a handful of vessels in the gulf pulling samples to assess seafood stocks, in the months since the spill, the agency has provided 16 boats just to sample for evidence of oil. Its laboratories in Mississippi and Seattle have processed 1,576 samples to date. That includes oysters, which can't move through oiled waters, and big fish like swordfish and tuna, which can.

Late last month, federal and state agencies responsible for keeping tainted seafood from the market announced new rules to help monitor gulf waters and determine when some areas can be reopened. Initial responsibility now falls to a panel of seven trained analysts who smell samples of seafood from the area. If three of the seven testers detect the smell of oil or other chemicals, the sample is deemed tainted and the area where it was found is closed to fishing or kept from reopening, said Christine Patrick, a NOAA spokeswoman. If there is no taint, the sample is sent to labs in Seattle for chemical analysis. Once the oil stops flowing and pressure mounts to reopen the closed areas, the panels could be called upon to test up to 100 samples a day.

It might seem a surprisingly unscientific method, but sensory testing is considered the gold standard. "The nose, believe it or not, is a sensitive organ and is capable of detecting low levels of hydrocarbons," said Joan Bowman of the International Food Protection Training Institute, a nonprofit organization financed by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. "Some people have the DNA to do it and some don't."

So far, the organization has paid for 56 special sniffers to travel to the gulf for NOAA training.

The chemicals in petroleum have been linked to cancer if eaten at high levels over time, according to the F.D.A. But since the chemicals are not believed to accumulate in the body, the F.D.A. has said that low levels are not necessarily harmful. "However, it should not be present at all," the agency said in the statement.

The F.D.A. also says there is little public health risk associated with the dispersants used during the Deepwater Horizon response because they aren't likely to accumulate in seafood and "are low in human toxicity."

Not all scientists are as convinced as federal officials are. The health effects from oil altered by the 1.8 million gallons of dispersants pumped into the gulf so far and the impact of such great quantities of oil have never been studied, said Ron Kendall, director of the Institute of Environmental and Human Health at

Texas Tech and a specialist on the environmental impact of oil spills.

“At this point it is premature to declare there is no problem, and I say that as someone who just loves gulf seafood,” he said.

He also thinks the smell test is inadequate and that more precise testing and analysis are required.

“Everyone is racing around to give an answer before we have really done the science,” he said. “We’re just at the very beginning of this thing.”

Government assurances might not be enough for Americans, many of whom are quick to abandon any category of food at the first hint of trouble in any one segment of it. A few years ago, spinach disappeared from dinner plates after packaged fresh spinach from a 50-acre organic farm in California was found to be contaminated with *E. coli*. And although no commercial peanut butter brands sold in grocery stores were linked to a **salmonella** outbreak last year, sales plummeted.

The seafood industry hopes to avoid a similar collapse, but it might be too late. “It’s a perception challenge at the moment,” Mr. Brennan said. “We battled this after **Hurricane Katrina**, too. People see those images and think automatically it’s over.” It’s far from over, say fishermen and chefs.

Seafood marketing officials from the five states that border the Gulf of Mexico are developing campaigns to let people know there are plenty of oil-free waters yet to fish in the gulf. Restaurants in New Orleans are still serving platters piled high with fried soft-shell crabs and broiled drum. And nearly 90 percent of Florida’s more than 1,260 miles of coastline remains unaffected.

Chefs are trying to rally support for the people who work the waters and whose livelihoods have been destroyed by an environmental disaster that dwarfs every other oil spill in the nation’s history.

“There are two stories to tell right now,” said **Tom Colicchio**, the chef and television personality. He, along with a handful of other celebrity chefs, took a quick trip to Grand Isle, La., in late June arranged by the Louisiana Seafood Promotion & Marketing Board and John Folse, a local chef.

“On one hand, they are telling me there are plenty of fish,” Mr. Colicchio said in an interview shortly after he returned to New York. “On the other hand, you don’t want to make it seem like there’s nothing wrong.”

He was so moved by the plight of the fishermen there that he returned to New York dedicated to serving more seafood from the gulf at his restaurants — with a caveat.

“I said, ‘I will pledge to serve it if you guys make sure it’s safe,’ ” he said. Mr. Colicchio knows he’s taking a risk, but said he had confidence in the system to keep tainted fish from his walk-in refrigerators.

“It’s almost self-policing,” he said. “They know if tainted seafood gets to the market they’re done.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: July 13, 2010

An earlier version of his article misstated the number of testers needed to determine if an area was safe for fishing.