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New Orleans faces a 'slime wave'

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The Gulf oil spill could end up blasting New Orleans with crashing waves of black muck.

Hurricane season starts tomorrow, and officials yesterday warned that high winds and rough surf could turn crude oil leaking from a BP oil well in the Gulf of Mexico into a black tidal surge capable of sliming miles of coastline with a stinking, sticky mess.

"You put a major hurricane in there, you're liable to have oil in downtown New Orleans," Ron Kendall, an environmental professor at Texas Tech University, told National Geographic.

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Mitch Landrieu, the Big Easy's mayor, said he's already worried about a major 'cane.

"The oil that's in that water is either going to be on the marshland or the land that it touches," he said.

"The challenges are great."

The spill, the biggest in US history, is already inflicting damage that could last a lifetime.

"You are going to see some longtime, if not permanent, change -- no question," Bob Deans, a spokesman for the Natural Resources Defense Council, told The Post.

"There are plumes of oil the size of Manhattan moving through the Gulf, creating dead zones. It's devastating."

Larry Schweiger, president of the National Wildlife Federation, said he fears the Gulf is reaching "a tipping point," after which there could be an "extensive" fish kill.

And if the gunk from the spill is pushed deep into coastal marshes, which act as a natural speed bump for storm surges, low-lying areas like New Orleans would become more vulnerable during bad storms for a long time, experts warn.

Predictions call for as many as seven major hurricanes this season. At least five may threaten the US coastline.

In the summer of 1979, fierce weather hampered efforts to contain a spill from the Mexican rig Ixtoc 1, which eventually dumped 140 million gallons of oil off the Yucatan Peninsula.

In the BP spill, it's estimated that up to 40 million gallons of oil have leaked from 5,000 feet below the surface since the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded, killing 11 crew members. And there is no immediate end in sight.

"It's all lose, lose, lose here," retired marine scientist Rick Steiner said. "This disaster just got enormously worse."

Louisiana -- already losing coastal wetlands in recent decades -- could bear the brunt.

"We are dying a slow death. Every time that oil takes out a piece of the marsh, a piece of Louisiana is gone forever," said Billy Nungesser, president of Louisiana's Plaquemines Parish, one of the hardest-hit areas.

The damage continues to mount.

The effect on the economy tops the list, with both commercial and recreational fishing closed for about 60,683 square miles. The closure went into effect on Friday.

The ban affects hundreds of thousands of commercial and recreational fishermen, devastating the livelihoods of shrimpers, oyster harvesters and charter-boat operators in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

For wildlife, the spill is an unmitigated disaster.

Oil, some of it in thick sheets, but also in the form of sheen and tar balls, has already come ashore in Louisiana wildlife reserves.

As of yesterday, wildlife officials reported that the carcasses of 491 birds, 227 turtles and 27 mammals, including dolphins,

had been collected along the Gulf Coast.

Tourism operators in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama -- including hotel owners, restaurateurs and charter-boat businesses -- have reported cancellations as a result of the oil spill, although some are picking up business from journalists, officials and cleanup workers.

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