

U.S. backing fishermen in gulf disaster



By David Frulla and Shaun Gehan

It will take years, if not decades, to understand the full impact of the ongoing oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. We extend our concern and prayers to shrimpers, oystermen, fishermen, and their families in Louisiana, Mississippi, and throughout the gulf who have been or will be put out of business, whether temporarily or forever.

The only potential silver lining we can see is that the Commerce Department seems finally to recognize the value of fishermen and fishing communities. "We stand with America's fishermen, their families and businesses in impacted coastal communities during this very challenging time. Fishing is vital to our economy and our quality of life and we will work tirelessly protect to it," said Commerce Secretary Gary Locke. As the former governor of Washington, Locke has a frame of reference with which to understand the fishing industry's history and value.

We often criticize NMFS and sometimes litigate against the secretary of commerce. But we do want to make sure to acknowledge the positive when it occurs. NMFS is, in fact, dedicating resources, at an early stage, to addressing and assess the consequences of the oil leak.

From the spill's beginning, NOAA has employed significant manpower and material to track oil, model currents, fish and water, and train personnel to ensure the safety of gulf seafood.

NMFS chief Eric Schwaab, NOAA

Administrator Jane Lubchenco, and Locke have made numerous trips to the region. Personnel such as Northeast Fisheries Science Center head Nancy Thompson, who came from the gulf region, have been shifted there for triage. NOAA research vessels, working with academic vessels, are using sonar and other tools to locate and track subsurface oil.

Also positive are NOAA's efforts to minimize disruptions of fishing operations by both tailoring fishery closures and working with the Food and Drug Administration to test seafood to help to assure the public of the Gulf's bounty's continuing safety. This is a delicate balance, but one only NMFS can credibly undertake. And NMFS has, in fact, established lines of communication to the industry through hot lines, text messages, and rapid response capabilities designed to inform fishermen when and where closures are going to occur.

Another question is whether this disaster can help hit the reset button on seemingly deteriorating relations between NMFS/NOAA and the fishing industry. For its part, *The New York Times'* "Green Blog" finds a quite different silver lining in the disaster: fish saved from the predations of fishermen. Pardon the sarcasm, but we guess it's better to lose billions of fish and larvae to poisonous chemicals than it is to have a sustainable, managed harvest.

More typical coverage, however, has put commercial fishermen and their plight in a more sympathetic light than we've seen in a long time. Hearing top Commerce Department officials explain the importance of commercial fishing is refreshing, but it shouldn't have taken a mega-disaster to get NMFS to this point.

Hopefully, this billowing plume of crude oil will help put our fisheries management issues into some rational

perspective, if for no other reason than to help address the malignant "information" presented in *The New York Times* and by many other news and environmental organizations.

When compared with the apparently relatively loose Interior Department regulation of the offshore oil and gas industry, fishermen are extensively observed at sea, monitored by satellite, and inspected dockside, all to ensure that some relatively imprecise level of sustainable harvest is set and enforced down to the final one-hundredth of a decimal point. NMFS' ham-handed enforcement efforts also appear to be a stark departure from how the Minerals Management Service and the oil and gas industry have historically interacted.

It is easy to say that the oil industry's political clout explains the difference. But the fundamental issue underlying the oil and gas industry's influence is a national recognition of how critical our nation's oil production capacity is. We hope NOAA and NMFS will keep "walking their talk" well beyond when the broken well is capped, so that the public appreciates the value of a vital domestic fishing industry. "Fish, baby, Fish."

Note: Those impacted by the oil spill may be getting a lot of conflicting information about their legal rights. We've heard about fishermen getting false information from certain law firms wanting to sign them up as plaintiffs. Before signing legal documents, you should check with your fishery association, personal lawyer, or state bar association for advice. The Southern Shrimp Alliance (www.shrimpalliance.com) has useful information, and the American Bar Association (www.abanet.org) can direct you to local resources. NF

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