

US oil spill clean-up boats recalled after crews fall ill

May 27 2010

All 125 commercial fishing boats helping oil recovery efforts off Louisiana's Breton Sound area have been recalled after four workers reported health problems, officials said.

The crew members aboard three separate vessels "reported experiencing nausea, dizziness, headaches and chest pains" mid-afternoon Wednesday, the US Coast Guard said in a statement.

"No other personnel are reporting symptoms, but we are taking this (recall) action as an extreme safeguard," said Coast Guard Chief Petty Officer Robinson Cox.

The move raises questions over the safety of the clean-up operation in and around the Gulf of Mexico, in particular the protection workers have been given as they mitigate the oil, and the toxicity of the controversial chemical dispersants being used by BP in an attempt to break up the slick.

One of the workers had to be evacuated by air ambulance to a nearby hospital for treatment, another followed by boat and the other two were transported by ground, the statement added.

George Barisich, president of United Commercial Fisherman's Association, called the official account of illnesses "a pack of lies," and said at least nine fisherman were treated in hospital Wednesday, while dozens more have worked through sickness brought on by the clean-up

operation.

"Mr Coast Guard, you're lying. Mr NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), you're lying. We've been warning since the beginning that this would make people sick," Barisich told AFP.

"BP calls our boats vessels of opportunity. We call them vessels of guys who gotta work," he said.

Louisiana fishermen usually make half their money for the year over the next 80 days, said Barisich.

But the oil spewing out of the ruptured BP well at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico sounded the death knell for this year's fishing season, leaving the fishermen little option to make money but to help with the clean-up.

"We're not unaccustomed to working through hard times, even when we're sick. A lot of guys are out there, getting sick, but they were working through it because -- how else are we supposed to live?" Barisich said.

"I warned them. I said this was dangerous and would sicken us. I asked them for respirators, gloves, plastic sleeves, and we're only getting them now from volunteer groups, not from BP."

Safety officers for BP along with US officials with the Coast Guard and the Environmental Protection Agency are investigating the incident.

A ruptured well from BP's sunken Deepwater Horizon offshore drilling rig has spewed millions of barrels of crude over the five weeks, encroaching on prized southern US coast wetlands and wildlife preserves, as well as billion-dollar fishing and tourism destinations.

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