

Better weather spurs hope over oil spill

May 3 2010, by Mira Oberman



A fishing boat approaches a dock to make repairs in Pass Christian, Mississippi. Kinder weather offered some respite Monday to Louisiana's coastal communities from a giant oil spill looming off shore, but it could still take months to cap the leaking well.

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Weekend storms grounded aerial sorties of dispersants and prevented skimming vessels from mopping up the growing 130-mile (200 kilometer) by 70-mile slick, which could wreak huge economic and environmental damage on the fragile region.

But an army of more than 2,500 responders took advantage of the breathing space granted by better forecasts Monday to lay out miles of protective booms, skim the sheen and train local fishermen for the

cleanup effort.

"It's looking better," said Petty Officer Curtis Ainsley, the leader of a coast guard team surveying the widening slick and installing mobile protective boom stations on boats.

"If we can get the seas to lay down for us we can make a dent," Ainsley told reporters at a command center near the fishing hub of Venice. "As soon as we can get the vessels here and the booms laid down we can get started skimming."

An indeterminate amount of crude, estimated to be at least 210,000 gallons a day, has been streaming from the wellhead below the Deepwater Horizon rig that sank on April 22, two days after a massive explosion that killed 11 workers.

The spill has sparked fears of an environmental catastrophe as the region boasts 40 percent of US wetlands -- prime spawning waters for fish, shrimp and crabs and a major stop for [migratory birds](#).

The latest coast guard status report pointed out that no impacts of oil on US shores have yet been confirmed, although overflights have not been possible since Friday due to the stormy conditions.

There was no sign of oil Monday morning at the pilot station about two miles north of the Gulf of Mexico at the Southwest Pass, the main entrance to the [Mississippi River](#) for [cargo ships](#) and deep water vessels.

But two of the pilots who shepherd the ships up the river spotted what looked like an oiled gull. "This one looked dirty," Captain Michael Fitzpatrick told AFP.

The bird was fluttering its wings in the water beneath the station and

then flew and landed about 30 yards on a rocky breakwater, where it anxiously preened itself.

"We keep holding our fingers, hoping we'll dodge the bullet," said Fitzpatrick. Seeing the bird puts "a sick feeling in your stomach. A real sick feeling.

"People like us who work around here, we respect the nature. We enjoy it. We love it. You never think it can all be taken away."

A day earlier, President Barack Obama visited Venice to show solidarity with Louisiana's threatened [coastal communities](#) and laid the blame squarely at the BP's door.

The British energy giant took full responsibility, vowing Monday to consider all compensation claims "promptly" and pay them quickly if justified.

BP has been operating nine robotic submarines in the murky depths for more than a week to try and activate the blowout preventer, which should have shut off the oil after the explosion.

It started drilling Monday a relief well to which the flow of oil could be diverted and then safely capped.

But with this process expected to take up to three months, immediate attention is focusing on a giant dome that could be deployed as early as this weekend to contain the leaking pipe a mile down on the seabed.

The plan is to place the dome over the leaking pipe to capture the oil and pump it up to ships, but officials warn that success is far from guaranteed, given that doing such a procedure so far underwater is completely untried.

Louisiana's 2.4-billion-dollar a year fishing industry was dealt its first major blow from the oil spill during Obama's visit when the US government banned activities in some areas for at least 10 days due to health concerns.

Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, who has been scathing of BP's response, warned Saturday that his state's "way of life" is under threat as fishermen and coastal communities struggling to get back on their feet after 2005's Hurricane Katrina brace for yet more hardship.

An overflow crowd of out-of-work fishermen gathered outside a ballroom east of New Orleans on Monday morning seeking jobs laying out boom material to stop the oil slick.

Attending the training does not guarantee a job and fishermen questioned how they would pay the bills if they cannot return to work soon.

"What are we supposed to do in the meantime?" said 48-year-old Milton Schackai. "How are we going to feed our families? We need some kind of assistance now."

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