

La. fishermen wrinkle their noses at 'smell tests'

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Capt. Rusty Graybill, a shrimp, crab and oyster fisherman poses on his boat in Yscloskey, La., Friday, July 30, 2010. About 70 percent of Louisiana waters are now open to some kind of commercial fishing, but state waters in Mississippi and Alabama remain closed and so do nearly a quarter of federal waters in the Gulf. Seafood industry representatives hailed the reopening, but Rusty Graybill, a boat captain from Yscloskey, La., who fishes for crab, oysters and shrimp, said "it's a joke." (AP Photo/Judi Bottoni)

(AP) -- Even the people who make their living off the seafood-rich waters of Louisiana's St. Bernard Parish have a hard time swallowing the government's assurances that fish harvested in the shallow, muddy waters just offshore must be safe to eat because they don't smell too bad.

Fresh splotches of chocolate-colored crude, probably globules broken apart by toxic [chemical dispersants](#) sprayed by BP with government

approval, still wash up almost daily on protective boom and in marshes in reopened fishing grounds east of the [Mississippi River](#).

When shrimp season opens in a couple of weeks and fisherman Rusty Graybill drags his nets across the mucky bottom, he worries that he'll also collect traces of oil and dispersants - and that even if his catch doesn't smell, buyers and consumers will turn up their noses.

"If I put fish in a barrel of water and poured oil and Dove detergent over that, and mixed it up, would you eat that fish?" asked Graybill, a 28-year-old commercial oyster, [blue crab](#) and shrimp angler who grew up fishing the marshes of St. Bernard. "I wouldn't feed it to you or my family. I'm afraid someone's going to get sick."

[Louisiana](#) wildlife regulators on Friday reopened state-controlled waters east of the Mississippi to harvesting of shrimp and "fin fish" such as redfish, mullet and trout. Smell tests on dozens of specimens from the area revealed barely traceable amounts of toxins, the federal [Food and Drug Administration](#) said.

The tests were done not by chemical analysis, but by scientists trained to detect the smell of oil and dispersant.

Chemical tests on fish for oil-related compounds are routine, but no such test exists for detecting levels of dispersant, said Meghan Scott, FDA spokeswoman. Federal scientists are developing one, she said. It wasn't clear when one would be ready, though.

The dispersants can kill incubating sea life, experts say, though its long-term effects are unknown. In humans, long-term exposure can cause central nervous system problems or damage blood, kidneys or livers, according to the Centers For Disease Control and Prevention.

Congressional investigators said over the weekend that the Coast Guard routinely approved BP requests to use thousands of gallons of dispersant a day despite a federal directive to cut its use.

Retired Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen said Sunday that federal regulators did not ignore environmental guidelines, but that some field commanders were given the authority to allow more dispersants on a case-by-case basis.

BP chief operating officer Doug Suttles took reporters on a boat tour of beaches and marshes on Sunday and said "they wouldn't open these waters ... if it wasn't safe to eat the fish." He said he would eat Gulf seafood and "would serve it to my family."

Like most fishermen in St. Bernard, the bulk of Graybill's income comes from oysters, blue crab and shrimp. The first two are still off limits, and the shrimp season doesn't start for two weeks. Graybill had been earning money from BP under the "Vessels of Opportunity" program allowing idled fishing vessels to help with cleanup work, but that program was scaled back Thursday.

Signs that anglers weren't jumping back into the waters abounded Saturday, especially at the annual Blessing of the Boats in Shell Beach, Hopedale and Delacroix, where the Rev. John Arnone of St. Bernard Catholic Church blessed far fewer than usual.

As Graybill maneuvered his light blue shrimp trawler Saturday near Comfort Island, which borders the open fishing grounds in Chandeleur Sound, fresh globs of oil glistened in the midday sun, staining the orange and yellow boom protecting the island. A dozen or so brown pelicans lazed on the oily boom.

Just the perception that he'll be pulling in oily shrimp, let alone that it

might really happen, can greatly reduce the price he can get, he said.

"They capped the well, they stopped the oil, so now they're trying to hurry up and get us back working to where they can say everything's fine when it's not," he said. "It's not fine."

Giving the OK to reopen one closed fishery does not mean it couldn't be closed again if more oil shows up, FDA Commissioner Dr. Margaret Hamburg said Friday.

"At the moment this is good news," she said after the reopening announcement. "But we have to remain vigilant."

Across the street from where Graybill usually delivers his catch, Dawn Nunez's family has for 30 years operated a wholesale business that sells shrimp to restaurants and seafood processors. She worries no one will want to the local catch.

It's absurd that the government is reopening the fishery when so many doubts linger, she said.

"It's nothing but a PR move," she said. "It's going to take years to know what damage they've done. It's just killed us all."

And relying only on a smell tests stinks, said Ryan Lambert, 52, a charter fishing captain who sometimes takes his clients out in the waters that just reopened. Fishing shouldn't resume, he said, until more data exist and better dispersant testing is devised.

"I have no confidence in their testing methods," Lambert said.

"But BP has just wanted to push, push, push to get us back fishing. You can't hurry it and then find something bad later," he said. "You can only

cry wolf so many times before (customers) decide they aren't coming back."

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