

US Gulf oyster harvest nose-dives since BP spill

August 12 2014, by Stacey Plaisance



In this Thursday, July 24, 2014 photo, third-generation fisherman Randy Slavich inspects oysters pulled from his private oyster lease in the Lake of Second Trees in St. Bernard Parish, La.. Oyster harvests along the Gulf Coast have declined dramatically in the four years since the BP oil spill. Even after a slight rebound last year, thousands of acres of Louisiana oyster beds are producing less than a third of what they did before the nation's worst offshore oil disaster. (AP Photo/Stacey Plaisance)

Gulf Coast oyster harvests have declined dramatically in the four years

since a BP PLC oil well blew in the U.S.'s worst offshore oil disaster, spilling millions of gallons off Louisiana's coast in 2010.

Fisherman Randy Slavich dragged a clunky metal net through an underwater [oyster](#) bed recently in Lake Machias, a brackish body opening into the Gulf of Mexico. For generations before the spill, this has been a bountiful lake for harvesting oysters.

His cage-like net pulled up dozens of empty, lifeless [oyster shells](#).

"It's not good," he said, pushing the shells back into the water. "We've never seen it like this, not out here."

Even after a modest rebound last year, thousands of acres of oyster beds where [oil](#) from the well washed ashore are producing less than a third of their pre-spill harvest.

Most worrisome to Slavich is the dearth of oyster larvae—future generations of oysters—once found in abundance on shells in the lake, east of the muddy bends of the Mississippi River.

Whether the spill contributed to the decline is part of an ongoing study; hurricanes, overfishing and influxes of oyster-killing fresh water had already put pressure on the industry.

"To the extent that [oyster populations](#) are down, data from government studies have indicated it is likely due to other conditions," Geoff Morrell, a BP senior vice president, said in a statement.



In this Thursday, July 24, 2014 photo, mounds of crumbled concrete and shucked oyster shells intended to be submerged to help rebuild oyster reefs sit along the roadside in Hopedale, La.. Oyster harvests along the Gulf Coast have declined dramatically in the four years since the BP oil spill. Even after a slight rebound last year, thousands of acres of Louisiana oyster beds are producing less than a third of what they did before the nation's worst offshore oil disaster. (AP Photo/Stacey Plaisance)

The millions of gallons of oil that spewed into the Gulf caused fishing grounds to be closed for fear the oil and the chemical dispersant used to break it up would make seafood inedible. More visible were the oil-covered dolphins, birds and other sea life that either died in the oil or required rescues.

But whether the spill crippled spawning and swimming oyster larvae that had not yet settled onto oyster beds isn't yet known, said Thomas Soniat, an oyster biologist at the University of New Orleans.

A BP "white paper" states that Louisiana biologists did not find any oil on the oyster beds they checked in 2010, 2011 or 2012. The paper also said the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's checks on oysters after the spill either found no hydrocarbons or levels far too low to cause health problems.

Regardless of the cause, the harvest is way down and prices are way up.



In this Thursday, July 24, 2014 photo, deckhand John Hoffmann sorts mature oysters from new larvae in Lake of Second Trees in St. Bernard Parish, La.. Oyster harvests along the Gulf Coast have declined dramatically in the four years since the BP oil spill. Even after a slight rebound last year, thousands of acres of Louisiana oyster beds are producing less than a third of what they did before the nation's worst offshore oil disaster. (AP Photo/Stacey Plaisance)

Louisiana has historically accounted for about half of the Gulf oyster

harvest and about a third of U.S. production. Louisiana's public reefs typically would produce anywhere from 3 million to 7 million pounds of oyster meat a year. In 2010 and 2011, production dropped to barely 2 million pounds, then nosedived to just 563,100 pounds in 2012 before rising to 954,950 pounds last year.

Mississippi and Alabama, where some oil washed ashore during the spill, also had very poor oyster production since 2010.



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"It's pretty disturbing," said Chris Nelson, owner of Bon Secour Fisheries Inc.

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