

Deepwater Horizon catastrophe continues to plague Gulf Coast communities

April 15 2015, by J. Glenn Morris Jr

Five years after the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history, communities along the Gulf of Mexico continue to struggle with the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, according to University of Florida researchers engaged in a series of projects funded by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

And while most of the nation's attention continues to focus on the environmental and financial toll of the spill that killed 11 workers and flooded Gulf waters with millions of gallons of oil, the less obvious consequences, including those related to public health, may prove the most long-lasting, researchers say.

"The individuals in these [communities](#) know how to deal with [natural disasters](#) such as hurricanes, but the oil spill forced them to face something they didn't understand," said J. Glenn Morris Jr., director of UF's Emerging Pathogens Institute and lead investigator of the study. "In terms of long-term effects, it's always the monster you don't know that's the most unsettling."

Morris and his team studied levels of anger, anxiety and depression at various points over the past five years in residents of Franklin County, Fla., and Baldwin County, Ala. The researchers observed that while 10 percent to 13 percent of the residents experienced mental health issues prior to the disaster, the figure rose to 30 percent to 40 percent in the two years after the spill.

The incidence of [mental health issues](#) declined to about 20 percent as the five-year anniversary of Deepwater approached, but it's still higher than normal for the region, Morris said.

Moreover, the researchers found that increased levels of anxiety and depression plagued individuals in coastal areas where oil never appeared.

"The fishermen in Apalachicola went out every day, not to fish but to look for oil," Morris said. "These people who had been fishing for generations were wondering, 'Has our future disappeared?'"

UF researchers also studied the resilience of Gulf communities affected by the spill. Among their findings: Small, close-knit communities such as Franklin County are somewhat at a disadvantage in bouncing back from disasters because they are less likely to have contact and make connections with larger communities where more resources are available.

The researchers used their findings to determine the resiliency quotient of the communities based on their vulnerability to disasters and their ability to recover from them. They applied that formula to counties throughout the United States to identify more than two dozen areas that exhibit high risk and low resiliency to disasters of all kinds.

The upshot, Morris said, will enable UF researchers to help communities nationwide forge connections that will make them less prone to disaster and increase their odds of recovery should a disaster strike.

Meanwhile, as the study enters its final year, the researchers will continue to work with communities along the Gulf Coast and seek additional funding for further research.

"There is a sense today that the oil spill is in the past. People are saying,

'Let's move on,' " Morris said. "But in these communities, there is still a sense of, 'Will this ever be over?' "

Provided by University of Florida

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