

Potential Impacts of the Deep Water Horizon Spill on Alabama's Coast
By Christian Miller

Last week's explosion on, and subsequent destruction of, the Deep Water Horizon platform, located approximately 50 miles southeast of Venice, LA, could have long-lasting implications for Alabama and all of the United States Gulf Coast. Although it's unclear exactly how much oil is being released, current estimates from the US Coast Guard put that figure at up to 210,000 gallons per day. The latest forecast from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) showed the leading edges of the slick reaching the Mississippi and Alabama coasts this weekend, and stretching east to Pensacola by Monday. Although it is not possible to predict the full impact of this spill on our coastal environment and economy, there is information available from previous oil spills which may prove helpful in predicting effects along our coast.

This spill has the potential to have serious impacts for our estuaries and coastal wetlands, which serve to protect us from floods and storm surge, act as a nursery for many commercially and recreationally important species of fish and shellfish, and provide critically important habitat for other species of wildlife. The effects of the oil spill on natural resources are dependent on multiple factors including the composition of the oil, oil quantity, dispersal techniques, and contact with organisms.

While offshore, the most immediate concern is for wildlife that interacts with the air-water interface, such as birds, sea turtles, and marine mammals. When onshore, impacts may occur to shorelines, near shore waters, and coastal habitat. The effect of the spill on coastal erosion will be determined by how much oil reaches these critical habitats, and how long it stays there. Excess oil resting on vegetated coastal shorelines could cause the vegetation to become stressed and die, weakening marsh soils. Weakened marsh soils would then be at the risk of accelerated erosion from waves and storms.

The hydrocarbons present in the oil can cause direct toxicity (mortality) to marine mammals, fish, and invertebrates through smothering and other mechanisms. The presence of oil in the environment may cause decreased habitat use, altered migration patterns, altered food availability, and disrupted life cycles. During past oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico, NOAA has documented direct toxic impacts to commercially important aquatic organisms, including blue crabs, squid, shrimp, and various finfish species.

Although crude oil has the potential to taint seafood with flavors and odors imparted by exposure to hydrocarbon chemicals, NOAA says the public should not be concerned about the safety of seafood they are buying. Seafood currently on the market has not been affected, and the Federal and State governments have strong systems in place to test and monitor seafood safety and to

prohibit harvesting from affected areas, ensuring that oiled products are kept out of the market. In response to the current oil spill, the NOAA Seafood Inspection Program is beginning to implement a plan of operation to assist both the seafood industry and the government to determine the extent of contamination in seafood.

BoatUS has also released information that is useful to recreational boaters and local marinas. If your marina or boat club puts oil containment booms in place, do not attempt to cross the booms with your boat. This will only spread the oil and damage the booms or possibly your vessel's running gear. If there is oil in your marina, refrain from running engines or other devices that have seawater intakes such as air conditioners or refrigerators. Hauling out your boat will prevent damage, but as of press time it was not clear if these costs will be reimbursed by British Petroleum (BP). If the spill is sighted coming toward your marina or already there, call the BP Community Information Hotline at 866-448-5816 to make a report. If your boat comes in contact with the oil, call your insurance company to file a claim. Uninsured boaters can call the BP Hotline at 800-440-0858 to file a claim. Damage to a BoatUS insured's vessel that is caused by the oil spill is covered. BoatUS members are directed to call 800-937-1937 to file a claim.

For current updates, check the NOAA Office of Response and Restoration website at <http://response.restoration.noaa.gov> or the unified response website at www.deepwaterhorizineresponse.com. If you are interested in volunteering with potential clean-up efforts, please contact the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program offices via phone (251)431-6409 or by visiting their website www.mobilebaynep.com.