

# Massive stretches of weathered oil spotted in Gulf of Mexico

By [Global Research](#)

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Just three days after the U.S. Coast Guard admiral in charge of the BP oil spill cleanup declared little recoverable surface oil remained in the Gulf of Mexico, Louisiana fishers Friday found miles-long strings of weathered oil floating toward fragile marshes on the Mississippi River delta.

The discovery, which comes as millions of birds begin moving toward the region in the fall migration, gave ammunition to groups that have insisted the government has overstated clean-up progress, and could force reclosure of key fishing areas only recently reopened.

The oil was sighted in West Bay, which covers approximately 35 square miles of open water between Southwest Pass, the main shipping channel of the river, and Tiger Pass near Venice. Boat captains working the BP clean-up effort said they have been reporting large areas of surface oil off the delta for more than a week but have seen little response from BP or the Coast Guard, which is in charge of the clean-up. The captains said most of their sightings have occurred during stretches of calm weather, similar to what the area has experienced most of this week.

On Friday reports included accounts of strips of the heavily weathered orange oil that became a signature image of the spill during the summer. One captain said some strips were as much as 400 feet wide and a mile long.

The captains did not want to be named for fear of losing their clean-up jobs with BP.

Coast Guard officials Friday said a boat had been dispatched to investigate the sightings, but that a report would not be available until Saturday morning. However, Times-Picayune photojournalist Matt Hinton confirmed the sightings in an over-flight of West Bay.

Robert Barham, secretary of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, said if the sightings are confirmed by his agency, the area will be reclosed to fishing until it is confirmed oil-free again.

Just Tuesday, Coast Guard Rear Adm. Paul Zukunft, in charge of the federal response, and his top science adviser, Steve Lehmann, said that little of the 210 million gallons of oil spilled into the Gulf remained on the surface or even on the Gulf's floor. Lehmann pointed to extensive tests conducted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration that included taking samples of water from various depths, as well as collections of bottom sediments both far offshore and close to the coast. Those claims, announced on the six-month anniversary of the spill, brought quick rebuttals from a variety of environmental and

fishermen's groups who insist their members have been reporting sightings of surface oil all along.

LSU environmental sciences professor Ed Overton, who has been involved in oil spill response for 30 years, said he believes both claims could be accurate. The Louisiana sweet crude from the Deepwater Horizon is very light and has almost neutral buoyancy, Overton said, which means that when it picks up any particles from the water column, it will sink to the bottom.

"It's quite possible that when the weather calms and the water temperatures changes, the oil particles that have spread along the bottom will recoagulate, then float to the surface again and form these large mats.

"I say this is a possibility, because I know that the (Coast Guard) has sent boats out to investigate these reports, but by the time they get to the scenes, the weather has changed and they don't see any oil."

"I think the reports are credible, but I also think the incident responders are trying to find the oil, too," Overton said. "This is unusual, but nothing about this bloody spill has been normal since the beginning."

Overton said it is important for the state to discover the mechanism that is causing the oil to reappear because even this highly weathered oil poses a serious threat to the coastal ecology.

"If this was tar balls floating around, that would be one thing, but these reports are of mats of weathered oil, and that can cause serious problems if it gets into the marsh," he said.

The reports are a great concern to wildlife officials. The Mississippi delta is a primary wintering ground for hundreds of thousands of ducks and geese, some of which already have begun arriving. The West Bay area leads into several shallower interior bays that attract ducks, geese and myriad species of shore and wading birds each winter. Earlier this month state wildlife officials were expressing optimism the spill would have minimal impact on most waterfowl visitors because little oil had penetrated the sensitive wintering grounds.

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