

Mississippi Shrimpers Refuse to Trawl, Fearing Oil, Dispersants

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The Mississippi Sound was recently reopened, but Mark Stewart and other commercial fisherman fear oil and dispersants, and refuse to fish.

Credit: Erika Blumenfeld/IPS

BILOXI, Mississippi, Aug 20, 2010 (IPS) - The U.S. state of Mississippi recently reopened all of its fishing areas. The problem is that commercial shrimpers refuse to trawl because they fear the toxicity of the waters and marine life due to the BP oil disaster.

“We come out and catch all our Mississippi oysters right here,” James “Catfish” Miller, a commercial shrimper in Mississippi, told IPS. Pointing to the area in the Mississippi Sound from his shrimp boat, he added, “It’s the only place in Mississippi to catch oysters, and there is oil and dispersants all over the top of it.”

On Aug. 6, Mississippi’s Department of Marine Resources (DMR) and the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality, in coordination with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, ordered the reopening of all Mississippi territorial waters to all commercial and recreational finfish and shrimp fishing activities that were part of the precautionary closures following the BP oil rig disaster in April. At least five million barrels flowed into the Gulf before the well was shut earlier this month.

But Miller, along with many other commercial shrimpers, refuses to trawl.

Miller took IPS out on his shrimp boat, along with commercial shrimper Mark Stewart, and Jonathan Henderson of the Gulf Restoration Network, an environmental group working to document and alleviate the effects of BP’s oil disaster.

The goal was to prove to the public that their fishing grounds are contaminated with both oil and dispersants. Their method was simple – they tied an absorbent rag to a weighted hook, dropped it overboard for a short duration of time, then pulled it up to find the results. The rags were covered in a brown oily substance that the fishermen identified as a mix of BP’s crude oil and toxic dispersants.

Miller and Stewart, who were both in BP’s Vessels of Opportunity programme and were trained in identifying oil and dispersants, have been accused by some members of Mississippi’s state government of lying about their findings.

“Why would we lie about oil and dispersant in our waters, when our livelihoods depend on

our being able to fish here?" Miller asked IPS. "I want this to be cleaned up so we can get back to how we used to live. But it doesn't make sense for us or anyone else to fish if our waters are toxified. I don't know why people are angry at us for speaking the truth. We're not the ones who put the oil in the water."

IPS watched Miller and Stewart conduct eight tests in various places around Mississippi Sound. One of them was less than a quarter mile from the mouth of Pass Christian Harbor, and another was less than one mile from a public beach. Every single test found the absorbent rags stained with brown oil.

During an earlier test round, the two fishermen brought out scientist Dr. Ed Cake of Gulf Environmental Associates.

Dr. Cake wrote of the experience: "When the vessel was stopped for sampling, small, 0.5- to 1.0-inch-diameter bubbles would periodically rise to the surface and shortly thereafter they would pop leaving a small oil sheen. According to the fishermen, several of BP's Vessels-of-Opportunity (Carolina Skiffs with tanks of dispersants [Corexit?]) were hand spraying in Mississippi Sound off the Pass Christian Harbor in prior days/nights. It appears to this observer that the dispersants are still in the area and are continuing to react with oil in the waters off Pass Christian Harbor."

Shortly thereafter, Miller took the samples to a community meeting in nearby D'Iberville to show fishermen and families. At the meeting, fishermen unanimously supported a petition calling for the firing of Dr. Bill Walker, the head of Mississippi's DMR, who is responsible for opening the fishing grounds.

On Monday, Aug. 9, Walker, despite ongoing reports of tar balls, oil, and dispersants being found in Mississippi waters, declared "there should be no new threats" and issued an order for all local coast governments to halt ongoing oil disaster work being funded by BP money that was granted to the state.

Recent days in Mississippi waters have found fishermen and scientists finding oil in Garden Pond on Horn Island, massive fish kills near Cat Island and Biloxi, "black water" in Mississippi Sound, oil inside Pass Christian Harbor, and submerged oil in Pass Christian, in addition to what Miller and Stewart showed IPS and others with their testing.

"We've sent samples to all the news media we know, here in Mississippi and in [Washington] D.C.," Stewart, a third generation fisherman from Ocean Springs, told IPS. "We had Ray Mabus's people on this boat, and we sent them away with contaminated samples they watched us take, and we haven't heard back from them."

Raymond Mabus is the United States secretary of the Navy and a former governor of Mississippi. President Barack Obama tasked him with developing "a long-term Gulf Coast Restoration Plan as soon as possible."

Mabus has been accused by many Gulf Coast fishermen of not living up to his task.

Stewart told IPS, "Normally we have a lot of white shrimp in the Sound right now. You can catch 500 to 800 pounds a night, but right now, there are very few people shrimping, and those that are, are catching nothing or maybe 200 pounds per night. You can't even pay your expenses on 200 pounds per night."

“We think they opened shrimp season prematurely,” Miller told IPS, “How can we put our product back on the market when everybody in America knows what happened down here? I have seen so many dead animals in the last few months I can’t even keep count.”

On Thursday, several commercial shrimpers, including Miller and Stewart, held a press conference at the Biloxi Marina. Other fishermen there were not fishing because they feared making people sick with seafood they might catch.

“I don’t want people to get sick,” Danny Ross, a commercial fisherman from Biloxi told IPS, “We want the government and BP to have transparency with the Corexit dispersants.”

Ross said he has watched horseshoe crabs trying to crawl out of the water, and other marine life like stingrays and flounder trying to escape the water as well. He believes this is because the water is hypoxic due to the toxicity of the toxic dispersants, of which BP admits to using at least 1.9 million gallons.

“I will not wet a net and catch shrimp until I know it’s safe to do so,” Ross added. “I have no way of life now. I can’t shrimp and others are calling the shots. For the next 20 years, what am I supposed to do? Because that’s how long it’s going to take for our waters to be safe again.”

David Wallis, another fisherman from Biloxi, attended the press conference.

“We don’t feel our seafood is safe, and we demand more testing be done,” Wallis told IPS. “I’ve seen crabs crawling out of the water in the middle of the day. This is going to be affecting us far into the future.”

“A lot of fishermen feel as we do. Most of them I talk to don’t want the season opened, for our safety as well as others,” Wallis added, “Right now there’s barely any shrimp out there to catch. We should be overloaded with shrimp right now. That’s not normal. I won’t eat any seafood that comes out of these waters, because it’s not safe.”

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