



Seafood testing from Gulf oil disaster could last years

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By **Brian Winter**, USA TODAY



By John Moore, Getty Images

In Port Sulfur, La., Stanley Johnson packs fresh shrimp for shipping from Chris' Marina on Tuesday. Authorities started shrimping season two weeks early in the area because of the spill.

Louisiana's fishermen are losing money every day as fishing restrictions widen due to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. As AP's Haven Daley reports, those who make a living in the Gulf worry the oil spill will affect them for years to come.

The danger posed by the Gulf oil spill to the U.S. food supply is worse than previously thought, and could make testing of seafood necessary for decades to come, officials and scientists say.

The [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration \(NOAA\)](#) said Tuesday it was doubling the area in the Gulf where commercial and recreational fishing are temporarily off-limits as the oil slick spreads to the south and east. The prohibited area is now about 46,000 square miles, roughly the size of Pennsylvania or one-fifth of federal waters in the Gulf.

Federal officials had already shut down fishing in some offshore waters from Louisiana to the Florida Panhandle.

The spill "will affect the Gulf, and possibly the entire North American region, for maybe years, if not decades," said Rowan Gould, acting director of the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#).

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Gulf products account for about 5% of the seafood consumed in the United States. Since the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded April 20, opening a gusher of oil from the ocean floor, testing has not found "substantial" quantities of contaminated seafood, said Roy Crabtree, the regional administrator for NOAA's Southeast regional office.

Oil contains harmful chemicals such as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons that can cause cancer if ingested by humans in high concentrations, said LuAnn White of the Tulane University Center for Applied Environmental Public Health. However, she said monitoring efforts by the government and the seafood industry make the possibility of significant levels of toxic contamination "extremely unlikely ... in anything that gets to market."

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"For the sake of people and the industry, it's better to take some short-term hits than let anything tainted get in there," said White, who participated in a meeting last week with Environmental Protection Agency officials to help contain fallout from the spill.

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Testing includes daily laboratory samples and the use of so-called "sniffers" — people trained to detect the presence of oil in seafood by using their noses.

"The human nose is actually the best oil detection tool we have available," White said. "It's like your grandmother told you — 'If it doesn't smell good, don't eat it.'"

Crabtree said government agencies are "doing everything we can" to ensure that no contaminated products make their way to Americans' plates. Yet he said that concerns over the spill's effect on ocean wildlife had intensified after recent reports of massive plumes of oil just beneath the surface, plus the continued movement of oil toward a current that could carry polluted water quickly toward the Florida Keys.

"We're incorporating some of this uncertainty into our plans," he said. "We're trying to get more information about what's actually happening underneath the water."

Most of the thickest oil has stayed offshore. Officials have put down more than 1 million feet of inflatable barriers to keep oil out to sea.

Lisa Suatoni, an ocean scientist for the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) environmental group, agreed that short-term risk to humans from seafood seemed minimal because of the monitoring. However, the globs of oil below the surface — which she said reminded her visually of a "toxic lava lamp" — and chemicals being used to disperse oil could have a lasting impact on the ocean's food chain, she said.

"For some animals, even if they don't die from the exposure, they can squirrel away those chemicals and survive," Suatoni said. "Anything that eats them could then get a concentrated dose of that (chemical)."

The food chain is especially sensitive at the moment because of the spring breeding season, Gould said. Gulf waters are full of recently hatched fish that are consumed by larger fish and other predators.

Suatoni said the oil could make its way to the shallow ocean shelf, which is a habitat for fish such as snapper, and remain there for an extended period. The long-term consequences are what worry her the most, she said.

"We may have to do this monitoring for a long, long time, and that's expensive," Suatoni said.

President Obama has said that all cleanup efforts must be paid for by BP, the energy company that was operating the rig when it exploded.

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