

**The New York Times®**  
Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT  
SPONSORED BY



June 9, 2010

# The Reality of Life for Louisiana Fishermen Is an Unpalatable Choice

By ABBY AGUIRRE

For a few afternoons last week, life seemed almost normal in Plaquemines Parish, La., a hub of fishing industry where the Mississippi meets the Gulf of Mexico. At the annual seafood festival in Belle Chasse, people lined up for rides and sandbagging contests. Piles of crawfish cost \$6, a dozen oysters \$12. A Seafood Queen was crowned.

But the reality of the oil spill was never far away. “Dredge Baby Dredge” T-shirts were scattered throughout the crowd, and there was a lot of talk about whose business was how close to the edge. John Tesvich, whose company, AmeriPure Oysters, had a booth at the festival, has seen a 50 percent drop in output since the Deepwater Horizon spill imposed rolling closures on gulf waters. The fourth-generation oyster harvester said there is a chance his business will be wiped out, depending on “which way the oil blows.”

Much of the talk was about what people — shrimpers, offshore oil workers, dock owners, charter boat operators — could do to survive. To stave off collapse, they say they have only two options: apply to the Small Business Administration for a disaster loan, or file claims with BP. Neither does much more than buy a little time.

At a community center in Grand Isle last week, no one was seeking a loan from the S.B.A. After Katrina, the agency was widely seen as frustratingly slow and disorganized, but that’s not why people are not applying. As Mr. Tesvich explained it, “If there are no oysters, what am I going to do with a loan?”

BP promises cash. But its claims process, which the Coast Guard asked to monitor on Wednesday, is also slow and disorganized. The first step is to call the company to get a claim number. When you get a call back, you go to a claim center — there are 25 between Louisiana, Florida, Alabama and Mississippi — where you submit tax records, profit-and-loss statements and “trip tickets,” the record of a sale made at a dock. A boat captain who is approved gets

\$5,000. A deckhand gets \$2,500.

BP said on Monday that it has granted about half of the 37,000 claims filed by business owners and their workers. Last week, it said it would send approved claimants a second check.

Mr. Tesvich was given a claim number three weeks ago but has not received the call to submit papers for AmeriPure. The amount BP is offering, he says, can't begin to make up for what he is losing. His three boats bring in \$250,000 a year each.

Sandy Nguyen, whose shrimp boat has remained docked in Venice since shortly after the closures began, has gotten her first check, after what she says was weeks of wrangling. Her two-net trawler pulls in more than \$200,000 during the shrimping season, which should have begun in the middle of May.

"They're basically saying, 'You give us your info, and we'll tell you what we'll do,' " Mr. Tesvich said. "That's not a claim. It's an insult."

There is sure to be a comprehensive settlement with BP. But if the litigation following the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill is any indication, a slow-moving legal battle lies ahead; parts of those lawsuits are still being fought in court.

Mr. Tesvich says that one of his three boats is pulling up oysters. But if things don't turn around in a few weeks, he will need to close his processing plant, where he employs 60 people.

Ms. Nguyen and her husband, Michael, have given up on shrimping for now. They tried to go out soon after the spill, only to discover that spots they thought were open had been closed. They were ticketed by the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. For a while, they considered journeying 16 hours in their boat to the Texas border, where they had heard there was clear water and shrimp to be trawled. But it would have cost \$8,000 in diesel, with no guarantee the waters wouldn't be closed before they got there.

On Friday, Mr. Nguyen finally landed a job that promises \$2,300 a day and something of a future: cleaning up oil for BP.