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# Florida Skips Offshore Oil Binge but Still Pays

By DAMIEN CAVE

KEY LARGO, Fla. — When rigs first started drilling for oil off Louisiana’s coast in the 1940s, Floridians scanned their shoreline, with its resorts and talcum-white beaches, and said, No thanks. Go ahead and drill, they told other Gulf Coast states; we’ll stick with tourism.

Now that invisible wall separating Florida from its neighbors has been breached. The spreading BP oil spill has already reached the Panhandle, and if it rides currents to the renowned reefs and fishing holes on both Florida coasts, the Sunshine State could become a vacation destination with the rules of a museum: Look, but don’t touch.

All because other states decided to rely on oil and gas, angry Floridians say; all because, in the water, there are no borders — only currents that can carry catastrophes hundreds of miles.

“There’s nothing we can do,” said Mike McLaughlin, 42, while stretching tanned shark skin on a dock here in the Keys. “We’re just sitting here, waiting for it all to disappear.”

Many Floridians, of course, say they are heartbroken for Louisiana, and they still reserve their most caustic criticism for BP and government regulators.

But with oil continuing to gush from a well off Louisiana, Florida has grown angrier at its oil-friendly neighbors. Gov. Charlie Crist said in an interview last week that “there’s a certain level of frustration” with the fact that Florida gets little if any financial benefit from offshore drilling, even though it shares the environmental risks.

On docks and beaches, many Floridians are less measured, and compare Louisiana to a neighbor with a bonfire that has set their block ablaze.

To some extent, it is a conflict set up by history. Louisiana and Florida may share the Gulf of Mexico, but they are essentially oil opposites.

Ever since World War II, when tar balls washed ashore across the gulf after German U-boats sank Allied oil tankers, Florida officials have held drilling at bay with state laws and lobbying in Washington to protect their state's bustling tourism industry.

Louisiana, meanwhile, is an oil state through and through that discovered its first commercial deposits in 1901 and started drilling offshore in 1947.

State officials have never looked back, and the resulting divide between the two states is now economic as well as cultural: oil and gas contribute about \$65 billion a year to the Louisiana economy, according to the state's [oil and gas association](#), while in Florida, tourism accounts for about \$60 billion.

The difference, Floridians now note, is that a crowded bar in Miami has no impact on New Orleans. Oil spills are a different story.

Sean Snaith, an economist at the [University of Central Florida](#), recently completed a [study](#) showing that Florida's gulf coast could lose 195,000 jobs and \$11 billion this year alone if the spill cuts tourism in half.

With oil drilling — as with Wall Street — “there will be significant rethinking about who benefits and who bears the cost,” Mr. Snaith predicted.

Florida has a lot to lose, even beyond tourism and fishing. Housing has become increasingly concentrated along the state's [8,436 miles of shoreline](#). With property values already down by a third in many areas and unemployment around 12 percent, the state could see its economy darkened for a decade by the spill.

Also vulnerable is the third-largest reef system in the world, which sits just offshore in the likely path of the loop current that, [according to oceanographers](#), has already sent small blots of oil around Florida's tip.

Residents worry about losing not just their livelihood, but also their way of life.

Fishermen motor out every day from docks all over the Keys searching for mahi mahi or [lobster](#) when the season opens in August, leaving early in the morning for that blissful moment when the sun rises over an open sea.

Boat-dwellers like Paul Peterson, 57, who piloted his 21-foot sailboat here from Massachusetts nine years ago, can hardly imagine being told that the water is off limits, or that the fish are too toxic to eat.

Mr. Peterson has been fighting Stage 4 lymphoma for years. He wears a gold necklace with a coin pulled from a local shipwreck, and he says the memories of [diving](#) — especially a few years back “with a great gal from Colorado” — have kept him going.

“It’s a hard fight,” said Mr. Peterson, referring to his cancer with the dropped r’s of New England. “And this place is so beautiful that it would be a sin. I don’t even want to say it or think about it.”

Many of his neighbors are still angry about how the cable news networks [publicized the appearance](#) of tar balls in Key West on May 17, tar balls that were not actually from the spill, leading some experts to surmise that they may have come from a ship.

Indeed, Florida is already learning that perception can define reality. Key Largo hosted a “[reef fest](#)” for divers last week, but after an extensive advertising campaign estimated to have reached 1.5 million people, only six divers showed up. Jackie Harder, president of the local chamber of commerce, said she had expected 300.

Charter boat captains and diving instructors are also struggling. In previous years, they would usually have had bookings for much of July by now. But next month is wide open for old-timers like Skip Bradeen, 67, who said he had never seen it this bad in his 40 years of taking amateurs out to land the big one.

What really worries most fishermen and environmental scientists are the long-term consequences if oil is carried around the coast of Florida, with plumes underwater and slicks onshore.

“It’s untold billions of babies of fish and lobsters and crabs,” said Douglas N. Rader, chief ocean scientist for the [Environmental Defense Fund](#), an advocacy group. “A wide array of seafood that is in the surface layers of the sea are transferred through the superhighway of the loop current and are depending on the habitats affected by the oil.”

Gary Sands, a third-generation fisherman who works just past the Pilot House bar here in Key Largo, took a break on a hot morning of hammering together lobster traps to explain exactly what that means.

Sitting a few dozen yards from where Mr. McLaughlin stretched his shark skins, Mr. Sands pointed to a pair of blond teenagers, the sons of a fellow fisherman.

“I’m 68, but these boys, they’ve got 30 years,” he said. “If it doesn’t come back for these boys, what’s going to happen?”

Albert Pflueger, 50, another fisherman, whose family once owned the largest taxidermy company in South Florida, pondered the question. Across the docks sat a boat named What Next. Removing his sunglasses, Mr. Pflueger said he could imagine the Keys emptying out like an abandoned mining town.

“The whole Keys makes its living on the water,” he said. “If there is no water, there is no Keys.”

*DuWayne Escobedo contributed reporting from Pensacola, and Gary Fineout from Tallahassee.*