

How the oil spill threatens national food security

It is time to rebuild America's aquaculture industry.

The shameful and growing environmental, economic and human disaster caused by the BP oilrig explosion and subsequent oil spill is having wide reaching effects. One of the most significant is on America's seafood supply.

Ocean-caught seafood depends on clean water. As we watch and listen, billions of dollars of fisheries, shellfish farms and other sources of ocean produced food are being closed, affecting the livelihoods of millions of people.

Imported seafood

What most Americans don't know is that according to the National Marine Fisheries Service, seafood imports from overseas already represent nearly 85 percent of the U.S. seafood supply. The BP spill is just going to make things worse. This is now more than a problem of business and trade imbalances, it is a matter of national food security.

There is hope, however. The United States once had a thriving aquaculture (fish farming) industry - and can once again. Like so many of our enterprises, over the past couple of decades much of it was lost to Asia and other parts of the world. Even the great catfish farms of the South are suffering from the strain. In this case, cheaper and faster is not necessarily better, for it has left us vulnerable.

Did it before

During the 1980s and '90s, my state of Arizona also attempted to produce fish using technology invented by ingenious local land farmers with help from the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension. Farms near the towns of Blue, Safford, Gila Bend, Hyder and on the Gila River and



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Ak Chin Indian Communities often made double use of their irrigation water to first grow fish, then cotton, alfalfa and citrus.

Crops included trout, tilapia, catfish, striped bass, and marine and freshwater shrimp. At one time, Arizona produced more than one million pounds of seafood a year. Not much compared to some states, but nothing to sneeze at either. Regrettably, lack of support, inconsistent production, poor marketing and overseas competition put most of them out of business as well.

Let's do it again

Now is the time to rebuild and compete. Time and our growing knowledge of sustainability has re-taught us that all that glitters is not gold, and there is a great value to local production. We now have new techniques, technologies, processes and procedures to improve our cost effectiveness, water use efficiency, and thus sustainability.

As we pray once again for the recovery of the Gulf and its people, we must use this opportunity to make the most of what we have and begin to feed ourselves once again. In this circumstance, "Drill, baby, drill" must make way to "Grow, baby, grow!"

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SPILL

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we are watchful, that we are monitoring the situation," Crist told reporters in Tallahassee. "We understand what is happening and are doing everything we can to protect our beautiful state."

Crist and other officials are continuing to spread the word that as of Wednesday afternoon all of Florida's beaches were open and oil free. Florida just launched a massive advertising campaign to lure tourists to the state's sun-baked shores.

Fueled in large part by \$25 million in BP cash, the state's ad campaign will be modified as circumstances require to walk the fine line of providing accurate information to travelers while not giving Florida's \$65 billion a year tourism industry an unnecessary black eye.

"Obviously, you have to have truth in advertising," Crist said. "We want to make sure it if does come on our shore that we redirect the message... so that it is accurate and discusses where it is and, maybe more importantly, where it is not."

Asking for help

The impending landfall sent Florida officials looking toward Washington and Lon-

don for assistance. Crist sent a letter to the U.S. Secretary of Commerce Gary Locke asking the agency to provide disaster relief to Florida commercial fishers, charter boat captains and others who make their living on the water. The governor is asking Locke to declare that the region's fishing industry faces collapse in the midst of the spill itself and the media coverage of the spill that he says has reduced demand for Gulf caught seafood.

Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Florida, again called on the Obama administration to put the full U.S. military in charge of oil spill oversight, saying the Coast Guard is not equipped to handle a naval operation now covering 88,522 square miles.

Florida Bankers Association president Alex Sanchez also went straight to the top, calling on federal banking regulators to provide more leniency on loans to troubled Gulf business and President Obama for more action.

Meanwhile, other officials are looking toward the "responsible party" for additional assistance.

"Tony Hayward, his company British Petroleum, and his oil are projected to violate the pristine beaches and crystal clear ocean water of northwest Florida - and I expect him to be in Pensacola to see the firsthand the damage his oil is causing," CFO Alex Sink said in a statement to the BP CEO Wednesday.

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oystermen and shrimpers who work the Apalachicola Bay in the Panhandle.

Other marine-based businesses are seeing the same thing. Capt. John Rivers, owner of Mega Bites Inshore Charter in Gulf Breeze, said that all of his bookings for June already have been canceled despite the fact that he doesn't take his charters within 100 miles of the affected area.

"This could easily cost me all the rest of my of 2010 business," Rivers said. "If the oil damages the (fish) nurseries, 2011 won't be any better. I'm already looking for work."

Lighting the darkness

Dr. George B. Brooks Jr., an Arizona-based scientist and an expert in aquaculture, knows better than most how catastrophic the oil spill could be.

Still he sees opportunity. His company, Southwest Green, is an environmental consulting company that puts "green" ideas and technology to work.

"Seafood, a major source of income, is eaten all across the country," Brooks told the Florida Courier. "Millions of dollars depend on it."

"Prices are already going up in Florida for oysters and rock lobster, and it's only going to get worse as the oil slick continues. Right now, one-third of the Gulf is off-limits (to fisherman) and that area will keep growing.

"We can grow our own shrimp. In Louisiana, there are about 800 fish farms. With the right resources and investments, we can ramp

up to produce shrimp and giant freshwater prawns. Crawfish, a Louisiana staple, is also a viable product. I think that oysters have potential too.

"I've grown blue tilapia, red tilapia, Mozambique tilapia. They are an excellent fish. Aquaculture can also create green jobs in Florida's inner cities," Brooks concludes.

Important opportunity

He maintains that the oil spill provides an opportunity for African-American businesses to take a leadership position.

"Food is a renewable natural resource. If you don't eat, you don't live. And being green is not just about energy. It's also about how to produce food so that it doesn't damage the environment. This is an opportunity to help mitigate the impact of the oil spill on seafood in the South, which includes Florida.

"We must get in front of making opportunities for green jobs to help the Gulf area and ecosystems maintain and recover," Brooks explains. "It could put millions to work. We can help continue to move the seafood the world needs. The issue is developing the right technology so we can make a profit."

Spill update

As of the Florida Courier's press time Wednesday night, sheen from the oil spill was less than 10 miles from Pensacola Beach and moving toward shore. Officials have placed miles of boom to try to keep the oil out of inland waterways, but the beaches will be mostly unprotected. Officials say they can't keep the oil off the beaches anyway, and they're easier to clean than the inland bayous and estuaries.



AL DIAZ/MIAMI HERALD/MCT

Elderly women wait to take baths outside the Municipal Nursing Home in Port-au-Prince.

VICTIMS

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areas at certain camps to cluster together seniors needing attention. They have also launched a radio campaign urging families not to forsake their elder relatives.

Still, HelpAge workers are concerned that in a country where need is so widespread, the elderly continue to be overlooked.

Elders abandoned

"There have been reported incidents of abandonment of older people in camps," said Rosaleen Cunningham, spokeswoman for HelpAge. "Concerns have also been raised of older people being at increased risk and unable to protect their belongings and themselves."

At Asile Communal, Clairevana Desbrosses, 87, holds onto an amber bottle half-filled with medicine to ease the shooting pains she's been feeling in her abdomen. With medicine in short supply, she fears that someone might take the bottle when she's not paying attention.

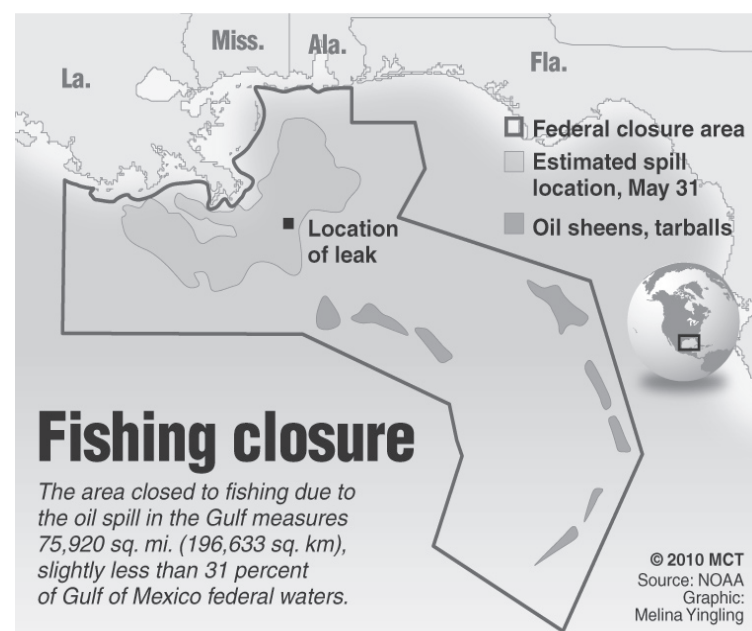
"I am not OK," she shouts repeatedly. She is one of the nursing home's 42 residents forced outdoors when one of two main dormitories crumbled. The residents, several over 90, share living space with the nearly 100 families who have set up camp on the nursing home's sprawling lawn.

Children play games around the muddied lawn, running past the line of naked elders who are being bathed by nursing attendants using buckets of cold water.

Early on, HelpAge paid for men to serve as security guards, after several residents complained that "gang members" were going into their tents and stealing what little food they had.

"The best option for the residents would be relocation as soon as possible," Cunningham said, "but the mayor has not agreed with any plans put forward."

For now, HelpAge has contracted a doctor to provide ongoing medical care at the home, and is working on converting the first floor of a clinic into a geriatric care space with room for 25 beds.



BP's robots hauled machinery a mile below the surface of the Gulf of Mexico, preparing the next risky maneuver to stanch the gush of oil from its renegade well.

The initial step to sever the crumpled and ruptured broken riser pipe that is spewing as much as 798,000 gallons of oil a day has occurred. But a BP spokesman said the company could not predict when it would be ready to cut the ragged pipe, a necessary operation to enable the snug fit of a cap that would funnel oil to a ship at the surface.

BP has predicted the new effort could capture much of the oil, but if it failed, it could boost the flow by removing any resistance the pinched and bent pipe may have created. Ultimately, the catastrophic leak can be halted only when a relief well - two are now being drilled - intercepts the existing well in August at the earliest to enable a new cementing job.

Many unknowns

Brooks takes a cautious approach about BP's response.

"It's important not to add to the hysteria because we don't truly know what will happen. Dispersants break the oil up, but doesn't make it go away; it just causes it to behave differently. Bacteria may eat some of it. We don't know how much it will eat.

"It's important that we do not panic," he counsels. "We must be wise in our response. I don't think the world is coming to an end."

'Recycling machine'

Still, Brooks is very concerned about the spill's impact on the planet.

"All life is important," he explained. "The earth is a huge recycling machine. It cleans the air and cleans the water. It does all of this for free.

"The machinery - the cogs and

gears - are animals and plants. Plants and the animals clean the air and water. If we kill them by the things we do, the machine begins to break down, and we depend on that machine. If it breaks down and we take out pieces - we kill the forest and kill the ocean - the machine begins to break.

"When you kill part of ocean, you lose the food supply. Oxygen comes from the ocean. The ocean's green color is all plants that are invisible to the eye, but add up to billions of aquatic plants providing oxygen. It's like taking pieces out your car and expecting the car to keep running."

What's next?

Brooks' life work is sustaining life and transforming green technology and ideas into a form that people can really use. His company also provides green training in Arizona. He is especially interested in providing training to African-American business owners so that they can earn the "green certifications" to take advantage of the opportunities put in place by the Obama administration.

"My father was a preacher," Brooks said. "How do we put green to work to end poverty, or at a church put green to work to serve the Lord? We can look at what we can do. Pray for the recovery of the Gulf, the people and their economy, and we can begin to produce our own food.

"Don't panic. Do something."

Starla Vaughns Cherin/Florida Courier, Christi Parsons/Tribune Washington Bureau (MCT), and the News Service of Florida contributed to this report.