

After almost ten weeks: no end to BP oil spill devastation

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The BP oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, now nearly 10 weeks old, is doing untold damage to ecological and economic life. Entire industries in the region have been shut down, tens of thousands of jobs affected, and lives ruined as the result of BP's criminal actions and the Obama administration's impotence in the face of corporate profit hunger.

On Thursday, a beach in Florida was closed for the first time—in Pensacola, some 130 miles northeast of the oilrig explosion site. According to a local television station, “Sheets of oil blanketed Pensacola beaches for several miles Wednesday.”

The area has been renowned for its white-sand beaches and “emerald waters.” No more. NorthEscambia.com, a local online newspaper described the reality: “It was the day that the World's Whitest Beaches were no more. It was the day that *the oil* began to wash onto the shores of Pensacola Beach. It was the day the sands were stained black with oil; it was the day the tears of the locals stained the remaining sugar white sand.

“It was Wednesday, June 23, 2010. Masses of oil began to wash onto Pensacola Beach from the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.”

A lifeguard, wearing a red handkerchief over his nose and mouth to block the oil smell, told the media, “It's enough to knock you down.”

Health advisories suggesting people should not fish or swim had been posted along 33 miles of Florida's Panhandle beaches, but Thursday was the first day people were kept off one of them. Pensacola, the westernmost city in the Florida Panhandle, with a population of 53,000 people, is thoroughly dependent on tourism.

WALB television reported that the Pensacola beach “looked like a black blanket covered the sand.” The *Pensacola News Journal* reported that despite the efforts of 1,100 workers and heavy equipment overnight Wednesday, “massive sheets of oil remained buried in the

sand.”

NorthEscambia.com bitterly reported that 44,955 pounds of tar balls and oil material were collected June 23 on Pensacola area beaches, including 10,245 pounds from a stretch of the Gulf Islands National Seashore and 7,500 pounds at West Perdido State Park; that BP has so far paid 18,694 claims in Florida at an “Average payout per claim” of \$902.08; and that BP's approximate profit “in the first three months of 2010” was \$6 billion.

In nearby Alabama, reporters from the *Press-Register* in Mobile noted the presence Thursday afternoon of “dark sheets of oil washing ashore” in state recreation areas on the Coast not far from the Florida border.

Oil also washed up at Alabama's popular Orange Beach. Double red flags warned swimmers to stay out of the water. The same treatment Pensacola received is predicted for Orange Beach and Perdido Key in Alabama. “It is following the track of the land,” said one expert, speaking of the spill. According to the *News Journal*, “Large red and orange plumes of thick oil streaked the water's surface just south of Orange Beach, covering at least 10 square miles of the Gulf. In places, the oil was as close as 100 yards to the beach.”

Alabama Department of Public Health officials are investigating claims that the spill has affected people's health at 20 sites in Mobile and Baldwin counties, which lie on the Gulf. Thirty-one individuals in the area have sought medical treatment in emergency rooms, urgent care facilities and clinics, complaining of ailments connected to the spill, via inhalation, contact or ingestion.

Oil is expected to wash onto mainland Mississippi beaches within the next days, according to Trudy Fisher, of the state's Department of Environmental Quality. “I think we all need to be mentally prepared to see some impact on our beaches,” she said. The oil has been closer to Alabama, “but winds shifted and began blowing it toward Mississippi over the last few days,” reported a

Biloxi, Mississippi newspaper.

A developing storm in the western Caribbean threatens to dramatically worsen the situation. On Friday, the Nation Hurricane Center reported the development of what could be the season's first tropical depression in the region. Moving at speeds of 35-miles per hour in a northwesterly direction, the storm system could pass over the Yucatan Peninsula and into the Gulf of Mexico. If this happens, high winds and waves could wash the oil on shore. Oil collection operations and the drilling of relief oil wells would have to be suspended, with some experts warning that cleanup operations could be offline for several days.

BP and the federal government continue to minimize the impact of the oil spill, but estimates on its far-reaching economic consequences are coming in from various sources. In a preliminary analysis, an economist from the University of Central Florida argued recently that the Gulf oil spill could put nearly 200,000 workers in Florida alone out of work, and cost the state some \$11 billion. A report issued by the University of West Florida last week estimated 45,000 jobs associated with tourism were at risk in the Florida Panhandle.

In Grand Isle, Louisiana, only 50 miles from the rig explosion, oil has "seeped into the island's bayous," notes *USA Today*. Grand Isle's population of some 1,500 people "normally grows from roughly 1,500 to more than 10,000 during the summer," but now "locals count only about 100 tourists. The local camps and motels are filled instead with contract workers and members of the military, here to help with the spill cleanup effort."

A local sports bar operator told the newspaper, "The tourism business is shot ... This place is wiped out. It's going to kill this little island."

Tourism is big business on the Gulf Coast. "Louisiana saw \$1.36 billion of its more than \$8 billion in tourism dollars generated by its Gulf region last year. Alabama's beaches produced 25% of the \$9.2 billion in tourism dollars reaped by the state in 2009. And of the 19 million visitors who flocked to Mississippi July 2008 through June 2009, 5.5 million traveled to the state's three coastal counties." Much of that is now threatened.

"In Mississippi, the spill could result in a \$120 million loss to non-casino tourism in the state's coastal areas this summer, according to a study released this month by the University of Southern Mississippi."

Those are some of the direct results. But the loss of tax receipts, claims Alabama's State Superintendent of Education Joe Morton, could be devastating for the

state's Education Trust Fund, composed of 10 different taxes collected at the state level and dedicated to funding public education from elementary to medical school.

In a press release June 10, Morton noted, "As tourism diminishes along Alabama's Gulf Coast, as the seafood industry is crippled due to the 'no fishing' areas of the Gulf of Mexico, as oyster and shrimping areas are decimated by the oil spill, tax receipts to the ETF will suffer."

He explained that because of "the BP tragedy" and corresponding loss of tax revenues, present and future, "I am declaring that I will charge BP with restoring the revenues lost so far, as well as future lost revenues to the ETF. ... The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is wreaking havoc on our environment and gulf coast economy. We cannot allow it to also undermine our public schools by reducing the very tax receipts that pay our teachers' salaries and help our classrooms keep the learning environment alive daily.

Stateline.org comments that budget officials in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida, "who badly overestimated revenue in the last two years as the national economic downturn deepened, now are facing the unexpected challenge of forecasting tax collections in the midst of a fickle environmental calamity that could last several years."

It notes that accurate estimates are "crucial so state officials can send the bill to BP... Alabama revenue officials, among others, are trying mightily to document the costs, which include salaries and expenses of state workers involved in the cleanup. 'Nothing of this magnitude has been done before,' says veteran Alabama finance chief Bill Newton."

BP, however, has no intention of paying for even a fraction of the damage its disaster will ultimately produce. Not only does it have lawyers, accountants and other highly paid experts working around the clock to come up with means, legal and otherwise, of avoiding such payouts, it can rely on the full complicity of the federal, state and local governments, and the judicial system, to connive in its efforts.



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