

Oil spill cleanup worker commits suicide

Hiram Lee
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The suicide of a charter boat captain from Alabama who had been working on one of BP's cleanup crews in the Gulf of Mexico is a tragic indicator of the toll the Deepwater Horizon spill has taken on people in the region.

William Allen Kruse, 55, had been a charter boat captain in the area for 26 years. He ran a small business in which he hired his boats out to tourists and other clients for fishing in the Gulf. As a result of the oil spill, Kruse, like so many in the commercial fishing and tourism industry throughout the region, found himself out of work. As Kruse told CBS in a televised interview last month, "The day that the oil entered the Gulf my phone quit ringing."

Like many fisherman and small charter boat business owners whose livelihoods have been stripped away, Kruse had no other choice but to go to work for BP, the very company responsible for the disaster. Under BP's cynically named "Vessels of Opportunity" program, in which local boat operators are hired to assist in the cleanup of the oil spill, Kruse found work laying oil containment booms in the contaminated waters. He spent the last two weeks of his life doing cleanup work for the oil giant.

Family members say Kruse was owed as much as \$70,000 for his work, but he had not yet received any payment from BP at the time of his death.

On Wednesday, while getting his boat "The Rookie" ready to sail out for the day's work, Kruse sent his crew out on an errand with plans to meet up with them soon after. When he did not show up, the crew went to check on him and found his body in the boat's wheelhouse with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

Coroner Stan Vinson, who worked on the case, reported, "Witnesses told investigators that Kruse had been upset about the loss of business caused by the closing of fishing grounds and public perceptions of the

Deepwater Horizon oil spill."

Vinson added, "All the waters are closed. There's no charter business anymore. You go out on some of the beaches now, with the oil, you can't even get in the water. It's really crippled the tourism and fishing industry here."

Friends and family who have spoken out on Kruse's death have described the strain caused by going to work for the very company whose criminal actions destroyed their jobs in the first place. A deckhand working on Kruse's boat told the *Washington Post* on Wednesday, "We're helping cover up the lie. We're burying ourselves. We're helping them cover up the [expletive] that's putting us out of work."

Kruse's brother Frank told the *Washington Post*, "There's no question in my mind that this is directly related to the oil spill. He had been losing weight. Every day he was worried." Frank Kruse said his brother "was very, very upset at the way BP was handling the oil spill. There was a lot of wasted money, a lot of wasted time. They'd give him a different story of what needed to be done."

Kruse's brother Marc told CNN that the cleanup effort was "madness." He added, "It's just a dog and pony show. Send [the boats] out. Ride around. Let everybody see them. Bring them back in."

The suicide is one expression of the growing emotional and mental health consequence of the spill. The sudden loss of jobs and the destruction of the waters on which Gulf-area workers have made their living for decades are leaving their mark. Many families are now depending on compensation checks issued by BP to replace income lost as a result of the spill. Several of those receiving checks have complained they sometimes arrive as late as eight days after they are due, forcing families to struggle without sufficient financial resources.

In Kruse's home state of Alabama, incidences of

domestic violence have risen dramatically since the spill. Bayou La Batre Mayor Stan Wright told the BBC that reports of domestic violence have increased by 320 percent, while calls coming into police stations have risen by 110 percent. In Louisiana, suicide prevention hotlines reported a rise from 400 calls coming in on June 7, to 2,400 calls on June 24.

The psychological trauma caused by the Deepwater Horizon disaster resembles the aftermath of the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill. A 1993 study of the psychological effects of that disaster called “Community patterns of psychiatric disorders after the Exxon Valdez oil spill” found significant increases in depression and anxiety.

The study surveyed 599 men and women from 13 Alaskan communities one year after the spill and found that 20.2 percent of those surveyed suffered from generalized anxiety disorder, while 9.4 percent suffered from post traumatic stress disorder.

The study used the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale to examine the prevalence of depression among the communities and found 16.6 percent of those surveyed scored higher than 16 on the scale while 14.4 percent scored higher than 18, both results indicating widespread depression. The report drew the conclusion, “The results suggest that the oil spill’s impact on the psychosocial environment was as significant as its impact on the physical environment.”

Workers in the Gulf of Mexico are now facing the same difficulties. Dr. Howard Osofsky, a psychiatrist from Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center, speaking at a hearing before the US Institute of Medicine on Tuesday, said of those affected by the Deepwater Horizon disaster, “We’re already having reports of increased drinking, anxiety, anger and avoidance.”



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