



Gulf Oil Spill Update May 5, 2010

I participated today with more than 100 "stakeholders" from all across the country for 2 hours on the issue of the catastrophic oil spill in the Gulf. The well continues to spew 120,000 barrels (60 gallons per barrel) of crude a day into and onto our BFT spawning grounds, yellowfin and swordfish fishing grounds and many more coastal and offshore species fisheries. The potential cap for the spewing broken well, new engineering feat is not even going to happen until Monday at earliest (so you can all do the math). They are welding away on it on shore as I write this. If the cap doesn't work (remotely attempted drop a mile below the ocean surface, where it is possible there may be some metal debris in the way preventing a smooth fit) then the spill will continue until relief wells are drilled which is at least 60 to 90 days away at a minimum (again you can do the math). The relief wells would be expected to reduce the flow from the broken well.

I was the 3rd recognized speaker (just couldn't press the 2 buttons fast enough to be first). Dr. Lubchecko (NOAA Administrator) and Dr. Eric Schwaab, the new Assistant Administrator of NMFS were both on the call.

Questioners were advised to be concise and brief given the absolute cut off time for the call. I got two questions in. The two relevant concerns I decided were most critical were about the spill drifting into the Loop Current which would have at least 2 impacts I have already described but will repeat. It will kill the BFT larvae and fingerlings present which remain in the top few meters of the surface for the first couple of months of their lives. Equally important, when the slick enters the Loop it will be entrained in a current that will take the oil between Cuba and the Florida Keys, then through the Florida Straits and possibly somewhat east of the Bahamas and continue its northward journey in the Gulf Stream current sometimes approaching within 15 miles of our beaches and coastal fishing grounds. It will be coming north at between 4 to 7 knots in places. If there is any westerly blow, anywhere along its path it will be on our shores. If there is a gale or hurricane, the damage could be very severe.

Thus, the two questions I could get in was about the practicality of further setting up the orange oil blockage balloons you see all over the news, to protect the LA., AL., MS., marshlands. Maybe set up similar oil containment equipment somewhere (maybe the narrowest point, not necessarily the 90 miles from Key West to Cuba) and limit most of the damage to the Gulf until the cleanup is somewhat successful? The answer was they did not know but it likely is an Army Corp. of Engineers question and would get back to me.

Then I asked about what is called (I gather since this is new to me but I discovered through a science friend in NOAA) about the "decontamination regulations". The Gulf boats face this problem immediately. But northern tuna/sword fishermen could be faced with this same problem if the worst case scenario materializes sometime mid-summer, I would guess. If you accidentally or cannot avoid passing through a slick, your vessel gets contaminated either on the outside hull or possibly through hull intake portals as well. If this occurs your boat cannot reenter a port until you visit a port registered with a decontamination facility. I asked NOAA to immediately put out a notice on the "decontamination sites" Again, they did not have the answer but promise to try to get the info before the conference call. This they delivered on. The number is 1-866-448-5816. I called the number and spoke to Connie who promises to have her manager call me back ASAP with. This is actually a British Petroleum office in Texas. I will let you know the results but you may want to save the number for now, in case this is the correct direction. I am skeptical for now.

That is all for now. I will keep you updated.

Rich Ruais
ABTA Executive Director