

Fishermen see brighter days ahead as waters closed by spill reopen

By Stephen Nohlgren and Craig Pittman, Times staff writers

With 26,000 square miles of the gulf reopened, some fishers are ready to get back to it.

MADEIRA BEACH - Down at the docks, grouper boats are lined up and waiting. Many have been waiting for a while - waiting for the part of the Gulf of Mexico closed by the oil spill to reopen, waiting for the crews and captains to return to fishing.

Now, 100 days into the Deepwater Horizon disaster, the wait may be over for those Florida commercial fishermen who have been trying nontraditional fishing methods or just collecting money from BP instead of selling their catch.

The government has reopened part of the gulf. Grouper fishermen can stop sitting home collecting payments from BP. Shrimpers can turn in their skimmer gear and put out their nets.

And everyone who eats Florida seafood can expect to see an increase in what's available.

"We're ready to go. I've been falling farther and farther behind on my bills," said Scotty Richards, 51, who captains the 51-foot *Warrior V*, a three-man long-line boat owned by Dean Pruitt that's based in Madeira Beach. "My girlfriend borrowed money from her stepmother yesterday to pay the electric bill."

Since the oil began gushing April 22, as the spill grew larger and larger, so did the area of the gulf that was closed to fishing by the National Marine Fisheries Service regional office in St. Petersburg. Ultimately more than 88,000 square miles - a third of the gulf - was shut down.

Since early June, that closed area included a zone off Florida's coast that stretched from north of the Tampa Bay area down to just west of the Dry Tortugas in the Keys. Last week federal officials reopened that area, more than 26,000 square miles, declaring it safe to fish again.

Fish caught by the agency in that area tested as oil free. Also, scientists had found no oil there since mid June.

So Richards and his crew spent much of Wednesday loading up with 15,000 pounds of ice, 800 gallons of fuel and 3,000 pounds of bait to head west and south to the reopened grouper grounds.

The closure hit long-line fishermen particularly hard because federal regulators had already narrowed their traditional fishing grounds to protect threatened sea turtles. Long-liners, most based in Madeira Beach, are bigger boats that traditionally have caught the most grouper in this part of the gulf.

Between the oil spill closure and new regulations aimed at protecting sea turtles from being caught accidentally, the long-liners were confined to a small strip of the gulf.

"Everyone was packed in there," said Bob Spaeth, owner of Madeira Beach Seafood. "There wasn't enough bottom to support the fleet."

Before the closure, Richards said, a two-week trip might yield 6,000 to 8,000 pounds of fish, netting him \$6,000 or so a month. The closure forced him into shallower water where long-lining is prohibited.

Some fishermen found it easier to just take a check from BP.

Commercial fishermen have individual yearly quotas for what they can catch. Last month, some captains who filed claims at BP's Clearwater claims office got checks for what they would have earned if they had sold an entire month's worth of quota - without having to work for it. They were told that if they fished, it would be deducted from the following month's check.

So some owners have been keeping their boats at the dock and collecting checks, said Spaeth. Normally about 30 boats sell their fish to his seafood house but only three are at sea now, he said.

"It's the law of unintended consequences," he said. "People are drawing money and not going to work."

Bill Houghton, Spaeth's business manager, estimates their supply of fresh fish has been off by up to 70 percent. But the price has not risen because demand has also fallen, particularly for red snapper and grouper shipped to other states.

"The customers' perception is that they don't want to eat fish because the gulf is full of oil," Houghton said. "They think the gulf is a big thimble and full of oil. That's not the case."

The grouper fishermen weren't the only ones collecting money from the oil industry. Thousands of shrimpers have spent the past three months skimming oil instead of dragging nets.

No more, though. Because of the cap on BP's gusher, as well as the skimming and burning, any oil still on the surface is weathered and tough - not something skimmers can easily pick up.

Since the Coast Guard is sending many of the shrimp boats home, they can now go back to shrimping, said John Williams of the Southern Shrimp Alliance, based in Tarpon Springs.

The changes may be as important for public perception as anything else, said Martin Fisher, who owns two boats and sells his fish at St. Petersburg's Saturday Morning Market.

Over the past 100 days, he said, he's experienced a 40 percent drop in sales. While the reopening will boost the catch, he said, changing public perception might be its most positive effect: "People may think that there is 30 percent less oil on the gulf because we just got a 30 percent opening."

Whatever negative image the spill may have created, grouper lovers still respond to a good price, said Gibby Migliano, of Save on Seafood, a St. Petersburg processor that supplies most Publix supermarkets.

"If we put grouper on sale, it sells like wildfire," he said. "At \$11 to \$12 a pound, there's no chatter about oil spills or anything. People buy it up."