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Capt. Anderson's

Fish are stacked in a bucket at Capt. Anderson's Marina in this photo from the marina's website.

Seafood safe, officials say

Worried customers calling sellers to check on fish

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[SCARLET SIMS / News Herald Writer](#)

PANAMA CITY — Fish harvested from the Gulf of Mexico are safe to eat despite millions of gallons of oil and chemical dispersants gushing into the water, federal officials said Tuesday.

“There is no reason to believe any contaminated product has been put on the market,” U.S. Food and Drug Administration spokeswoman Rita Chappelle wrote in an e-mail Tuesday. “Fish and shellfish harvested from areas unaffected by the closures are considered safe to eat.”

None of Florida’s waters are closed to fishing, but about 19 percent of the gulf’s waters are closed. Much of that is popular to local fishermen. The closed area is 45,728 square miles and resembles a giant hook spreading southeast and west. Officials are trying to prevent harvesting in waters where oil is or where it might reach soon.

“NOAA has already closed a large area of the Gulf of Mexico to commercial fishing, and some state molluscan shellfish beds have been closed in anticipation of the oil nearing the shoreline,” Chappelle said.

Concern over whether fish and oysters from gulf waters are contaminated has grown since the oil rig Deepwater Horizon sank off the Louisiana coast about a month ago. Chemicals used to disperse the oil are less toxic than oil but still will kill fish, officials said.

Thousands of species use the gulf for nesting, spawning and migrating. About 70 percent of the nation’s oysters come from the gulf, which also is known as one of the world’s most productive commercial fisheries, according to a study from Louisiana Sea Grant.

‘Long-term effects’

Restaurants across the Southeast and Northeast use fish harvested from the gulf, while some catches come directly from seafood dealers like Greg Abrams Seafood. A few of those buyers are calling to make sure the local catch is safe, company spokeswoman Sherrie Hook said.

Toxic oil already is killing sea life and birds, but this could be just the start of the ecological toll the Gulf Coast will face, federal officials said during a press conference Tuesday. The oil slick could kill larvae and juvenile fish, cutting into future populations of everything from turtles and whales to red snapper and gannets. Blue fin tuna is spawning, and shrimp and blue crabs are likely to be hit. Oyster beds across Louisiana’s coast have closed.

“We are concerned,” the National Park Service’s natural resources chief Glenn Plumb said. “We anticipate long-term effects.”

What bothers scientists most is what they can’t see. Birds that live most of their lives 50 to 60 miles out to sea could die without scientists knowing, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service environmental quality chief Dr. Roger Helm said. In fact, deepwater fish impacted by the oil could simply vanish, making qualifying the damage more difficult.

“Most of those mortalities will not make it ashore to be counted,” said Barbara Schroeder, National Sea Turtle coordinator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s fisheries.

A slew of agencies including the Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA are monitoring and testing fisheries to make sure fish and oysters are safe. Scientists at the NOAA’s National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science and Southeast Fisheries Science Center are collecting oysters and sediment from about 60 Gulf Coast sites and testing samples with the help of the Louisiana State University and the Mote Marine Laboratory, according to NOAA’s Web site.

The FDA is working with Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Texas officials and coordinating with NOAA and the federal environmental agency to monitor the waters, the FDA's Chappelle said. Local emergency services Deputy Chief Brad Monroe said oil has not tarnished Bay County's water quality.

The fish are safe, Hook said. Abrams is sending vessels more than 100 miles away from the oil slick to make sure the catch has no chance of being contaminated, she said. Scientists said Tuesday that fish naturally shed toxins they might have swam through after a few days, and Hook said fish naturally will avoid the oil.

"Fish — they move away from things like this," Hook said. "Boats are coming in with fish. It is perfectly safe."