

Oysterman: BP left us vulnerable, flooding could be 'knockout blow'



Parts of Louisiana's \$360 million oyster business could be destroyed if flood spillways are opened.

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[Updated at 9:33 p.m. ET Friday] Today Louisiana officials announced precautionary closures of two oyster harvesting areas that are receiving large amounts of freshwater intrusion from the opening of the Bonnet Carre Spillway and from the Mississippi River.

[Posted at 12:10 p.m. ET Friday] As the massive flooding from the Mississippi heads towards the nation's richest oyster grounds, Mike Voisin feels that old familiar feeling.

He's seen the damage caused to the oyster business in Louisiana firsthand over the past six years. After Hurricane Rita and then Hurricane Katrina ravaged Louisiana, the oyster business realized they needed protection. A part-government, part-private insurance program gave them breathing room to recuperate.

But then the blows kept coming. One, after another, after another. Hurricane Ike and Hurricane Gustav again battered the spirits and livelihoods of those who depend on their oyster crops.

So when Voisin, the seventh generation in his family's oyster processing business and the chairman of the Louisiana Oyster Task Force, saw his crop destroyed by Hurricane Gustav, he did what most Cajun country people did - rebuild. He knew he had a safety net - in the form of insurance - to hold him over.

But perhaps the final blow was the Deepwater Horizon oil disaster - because its destruction of oyster production meant he and others in the business were ineligible for insurance since the program was dismantled shortly after the disaster.

Gone was the exact thing they had worked hard to ensure - a protected livelihood.

That's why Voisin told CNN he plans to add any losses because of his lack of insurance to his company's claims against BP, since it left him operating at half the normal production rate - if that.

[The government worked with a private insurance company to oversee the program](#) – but it was suspended "expressly because of the BP spill" since it was determined their might not even be enough oyster beds for the season, Michelle Bouchard, with the public affairs office of the USDA Risk Management Agency said.

"We've been telling oystermen they need to file claims with BP since it was a direct result [that they couldn't be insured]," Bouchard said. The office of Ken Feinberg, who is the claims fund administrator for BP had no comment on the concern.

But waiting for a payout from BP may take a while - many Gulf residents are still waiting for the first round of claims to come through. And waiting is rough for those like Voisin, CEO of Houma-based Motivatit Seafoods Inc., and others who had finally bounced back from Ike and Gustav and were finally ready to return to market.

"This is the year we and they were coming back," he said.

[Now, if the state decides to open spillways](#) to help [protect Louisiana from dangerous flood waters](#), it will likely mean destruction of those families' oyster crops and no insurance money to protect them.

"The right thing to do is to open these spillways," Voisin said. "But the right thing doesn't always feel good."

Voisin told CNN he worries that for some oystermen, the spillways could finally destroy businesses.

"We were climbing back and we've been climbing for a long, long time," he said. "But we keep hitting a rotten rung on a ladder and fall back down."

For those who don't have other avenues of income or other crops in different settings the impact could be devastating.

"I do think this may break a few camels' backs," he said. "It is a straw, a moment in time, but its a pretty heavy straw and some people don't have the diversity of farming to make up for that."

Voisin said he expects there to be significant mortality of oysters - and businesses - depending on their location.

"This will be - in my opinion - for some, a knockout blow because they've dealt with six major events in a six year period," he said. "And farmers, including myself who could have had insurance and been taken care of in some way - they're not going to be able to."

"So it will take an oyster community that was providing \$360 million of economic impact, to 25% of that," he said.

And because of that, Voisin said he and others will likely have to turn to the government for help - though it's not something they wanted to do and the reason they sought out insurance in the first place. But with the oil disaster taking that option off the table, Voisin said many people will have no choice.

"They're going to be challenged, not basically because of anything they did, and even though they were prepared," he said, so they're going to need help.

And Voisin said he plans to go back to Congress in a few weeks to ask for just that.

Still, Voisin said even though "it's a shame" those in the oyster business will likely suffer because of the lack of insurance and flooding, [like in years past, he knows the spirit of the people in the business means they will endure it.](#)

"We'll hang in there," he said. "I see there will be a future. I love the culture that I live in, I love the oyster community," he said. "It'd be nice if we could get Moses and part the sea, but instead of parting it have it go up and over oysters, but those are the tragedies that come with protecting Louisiana as a whole."

The impact of the possible opening of the spillways may not be immediately known, but Voison said he expects to flourish again in two to three years.

"Like Douglas MacArthur said, 'We will return.'"