

THE TIMES PICAYUNE

Commercial fishing east of Mississippi River could reopen this week

Published: Monday, July 26, 2010, 10:44 PM



[Chris Kirkham, The Times-Picayune](#)

After extensive lab testing and negotiations between state fisheries managers and the federal government, commercial fishing in most areas east of the Mississippi River could resume by the end of this week, more than 100 days after the beginning of the [massive Gulf oil spill](#).



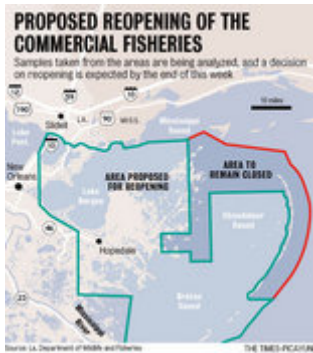
Chris Granger, The

Times-Picayune Many shrimpers and fishers are using their boats to lay boom or otherwise help in the BP oil cleanup, but reopening commercial fishing grounds would mean they can get back to the work they love.

The news comes more than a week after state officials reopened most of southeast Louisiana's waters to [sport fishing](#), but left the commercial industry facing expansive precautionary closures because of past oil sightings that stretch from eastern Lake Pontchartrain around the mouth of the river and west to Morgan City.

With fewer oil sightings since BP placed a cap atop the stricken well in the Gulf, and more than 500 fish, shrimp, crab and oyster samples in the state showing no signs of contamination from oil, the [state is continuing to push](#) the federal Food and Drug

Administration and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to allow them to move forward with reopening other commercial fishing grounds west of the river.



"We're 90 days into this, and I think the data speaks for itself," said Randy Pausina, assistant secretary for fisheries at the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. "There's been no indication that any seafood is even remotely close to being at any level of concern. Find me the concern and prove it to me."

Reopening commercial fishing is a touchy subject for both the state and federal governments, and the thousands of people who rely on catching, distributing and cooking Gulf seafood for a living. Being too cautious costs money in the short term, but the risk of tainted seafood reaching the market could have widespread repercussions for Louisiana's seafood brand.

One of the key conflicts so far has been between state fisheries managers and the FDA and NOAA over the strength of testing requirements needed to reopen an area. For the FDA to consider allowing the state to reopen fishing grounds, an area must be completely free of oil for at least three days and be deemed unlikely to have more oil effects for another three days.

Once that is determined, the state can begin collecting fish samples to be sent to FDA and NOAA labs for smell testing and for a chemical analysis.

The timing of that test, which can take seven to 10 days, has frustrated state officials. And during the past few weeks, the state has complained that the FDA has changed the requirements numerous times, asking for more samples than the state originally thought would be needed and then eventually requiring less.



David Grunfeld, Times-Picayune archive On June 10, Milady Canales at the New Orleans Fish House fillets drum that was caught in the western Gulf.

State officials have also taken issue with the FDA's determination of whether oil is still present in an area, saying that light sheens and small amounts of oil should not be considered in the same league as the major oil patches spotted before the well was capped.

"If you tell us that if we have oil in an area, we can't test the area. Well, we're going to have tar balls and sheen for a while, and we know that tar balls are aged oil. We know that they're not volatile," said Harlon Pearce, the chairman of the [Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board](#).

The state has proposed that the FDA have a representative on board with Wildlife and Fisheries biologists and state Department of Environmental Quality workers who are observing the oil firsthand.

"I want to make sure they don't make some kind of cubicle decision from Washington," Pausina said. "Have people in the boat with our people, to actually see it. We plan to take them out as much as they want to go out."



'There's been no indication that any seafood is even remotely close to being at any level of concern,' said Randy Pausina, assistant secretary for fisheries at the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

On Monday, the FDA released a new protocol for reopening fishing grounds that is designed to keep up with the large volume of fish samples coming in from across the Gulf Coast. During the next few weeks, the agency will be bringing on at least 14 new labs to test seafood samples, up from only two labs in previous weeks.

The agency is also instituting a different kind of chemical testing that is aimed at cutting the seven-to-10 day time frame down to a 48-hour window for testing seafood samples.

"We know how eager people are to get back on the water," said FDA spokeswoman Meghan Scott. "We realized that the seven-10-day throughput that was required for this traditional method wasn't necessarily going to work all that well."

For the potential reopening east of the river, the lengthier testing requirements are still in place, meaning the state should be able to get results back by the end of the week. If the results show no danger to public health, Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Commissioner Robert Barham could order the reopening for finfish, shrimp and crabs.

The Department of Health and Hospitals, which oversees the health of oyster beds across the state, could also decide to reopen oyster areas east of the river.

Seafood suppliers and fishers who have been waylaid by the widespread closures say the potential reopening is a bit of bright news amid a grim three months. Some suppliers are worried that with so many fishers working for BP in the cleanup, even a large reopening might not be enough to get supplies back on line. But Karen Rotolo, a shrimp and crab fisher who works out of Venetian Isles in eastern New Orleans, said most fishers will have no choice but to get out on the water and try to salvage the season.

"People can't wait to see if they can get a check from BP. They don't want to wait," she said. "We have to catch what we can, we have to do what we've got to do now. Some people are getting checks, and that's great, but it's not enough to tide you over for your future. Because we don't know if we've got a future."

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