

NPR STORY ON SAFETY OF GULF SEAFOOD

April 14, 2011

The Gulf of Mexico is known for its bounty — blue crab, shrimp, grouper, tuna, oysters — but ever since oil tainted a portion of the Gulf's fishing grounds, the seafood has been a tough sell.

Even though much of the oil that spilled from last April's Deepwater Horizon rig explosion has been cleaned up, the future is still murky for people who make a living plying Gulf waters.

Mike Voisin is a seventh-generation Louisiana oysterman.

"Once it was capped, everybody brought out that proverbial sigh of relief, like 'Whew, we're through this thing.' Well we weren't, and we still aren't," Voisin says.

Voisin is president of Motivait Seafoods, an oyster processing company in Houma, La. His workers are shucking oysters mostly from Texas these days.

The Biggest Challenge

Before the spill, Louisiana produced half of the oysters sold from the Gulf. Voisin's business was down 60 percent after the spill, and it has been slow to recover. The state's fisheries are projected to lose \$74 million this year from the lingering impact of the oil spill.



[Enlarge](#) Debbie Elliott/NPR

NOAA technician Chanda Gaines pulls a sample from a tripletail caught in the Gulf of Mexico. The lab puts Gulf seafood through a series of sensory and chemical tests for contamination from the BP oil spill.



Debbie Elliott/NPR

NOAA technician Chanda Gaines pulls a sample from a tripletail caught in the Gulf of Mexico. The lab puts Gulf seafood through a series of sensory and chemical tests for contamination from the BP oil spill.

"People are hesitant to buy Gulf shrimp or Gulf product coming out of this oil area," says Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Secretary Robert Barham.

Most oyster grounds are open again. But they're not producing nearly what they did before, in part because of damage caused by flushing freshwater out of the Mississippi River to hold the oil at bay.

But Voisin says the main problem is that customers are afraid.

"The brand for the seafood community is the biggest challenge that we're faced with," he says.

A recent survey of restaurants around the country conducted by Greater New Orleans Inc. shows just how bad the perception is. The economic development group's president, Michael Hecht, says twice as many people now ask about the origin of seafood.

"The implication of course is they're asking about whether it's from the Gulf or whether it's Louisiana seafood," Hecht says.

He says 50 percent of people surveyed nationally now have an unfavorable view of Louisiana seafood. That's a huge swing from a 73 percent favorable view before the spill.

They plan to fight back with a national ad campaign paid for with BP money.

The state of Alabama is already doing that with a new [Serve the Gulf](#) campaign.



[Enlarge](#) Debbie Elliott/NPR

Seafood samples are placed in Pyrex dishes to await sensory analysis. Inspectors will sniff for the slightest whiff of oil. Samples are also cooked for a taste test to detect any problems.



Debbie Elliott/NPR

Seafood samples are placed in Pyrex dishes to await sensory analysis. Inspectors will sniff for the slightest whiff of oil. Samples are also cooked for a taste test to detect any problems.

Seafood Testing

The federal government is also trying to get the word out.

"Test results have been unequivocal. Gulf seafood is safe to eat," says Eric Schwaab, head of fisheries at NOAA.

At the agency's lab in Pascagoula, Miss., sensory analysts spend their days bending over Pyrex dishes and smelling the fish inside for the slightest whiff of oil.

Then they'll have a taste. Seafood samples are also chemically analyzed for hydrocarbons and the dispersant BP sprayed on the oil slick. NOAA's Walt Dickhoff says they've

analyzed more than 5,000 samples and all have passed at margins 100 to 1,000 times below levels of concern.

"This is the most tested seafood in history. I'm completely confident it's safe, it's not contaminated," Dickhoff says.

But others aren't so convinced.

"I'm not eating the seafood, and I really think there are questions about its safety," says Anne Rolfes, founding director of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, an environmental group that helps citizens collect their own samples.

She says their testing has found oil and heavy metals in Gulf seafood at levels the FDA says are not of concern. Rolfes says she has a different definition of tainted.

"It shouldn't be considered normal to have the presence of oil in your shrimp and to have heavy metals in your oyster. What I fear is that we're creating this new normal where you have oil in your seafood and nobody blinks an eye," she says.

Oyster processor Voisin says restoring trust will take time. It took several years to recover from Hurricane Katrina, he says, and he expects to overcome this man-made disaster, too.

"We're not shy about portraying who we are. And in five years, we've been knocked down a few times. But we're getting back up. We're comin'," he says.