

# **As oil slick threatens the coast, seafood industry and officials worry**

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**and Guy Busby**

The oil slick in the Gulf of Mexico is threatening shrimp spawning grounds, which could deal a blow to the seafood industry.

BAYOU LA BATRE, Ala. -- Late Tuesday morning, Terry Drawdy, owner of Drawdy Crab Co., received a call from an East Coast seafood dealer.

"You need to get all you can get, because it looks like that oil spill's gonna mess us up," Drawdy told him.

With the spill looming in the Gulf of Mexico and threatening to turn toward the Alabama coast, the effects could be catastrophic on the state's seafood and tourism industries, men like Drawdy said.

The crab trade in the state is only just beginning to recover from its worst winter in more than a decade, said Drawdy, who also deals in oyster, fish and shrimp.

Action had started to pick up in the past week, he said.

"We've been starving like chickens since December," Drawdy said. "Now we start to get a few, and we got this here hovering over us. I think it'll ruin a lot of people."

Even if the oil spill does not reach the Alabama coastline, a majority of seafood processed in Bayou La Batre comes from off the Louisiana coast, east of the Mississippi River. Shrimp season is picking up along the Gulf Coast from Alabama to Louisiana, said Ernie Anderson, president of the Organized Seafood Association of Alabama.

But the oil appeared to be drifting toward corridors where the shrimp spawn, he said. Should the oil reach those areas, the state's shrimp industry could be wiped out.

"The marshland is our incubators for all species of seafood," said Bayou La Batre Mayor Stan Wright. "If it gets polluted or killed, we're in trouble. We're in big, long-term trouble."

Wright remained optimistic, however, saying he was working with federal and state environmental agencies to protect Bayou La Batre and Bayou Coden.

Wright, owner of Wright Brand Oysters, said Alabama oyster reefs had only recently been rebuilt in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and years of drought.

"If this stuff gets in the bottom, then there's no reason to even try to create another oyster reef," Wright said. "I don't know what the procedure would be to clean them up. I really don't."

"I don't want anybody to get this slammed into their Gulf Coast, but dear God, we don't need this."

Across the bay in Baldwin County, officials and residents waited to learn whether the spill would affect wildlife and tourism.

A substantial oil slick reaching the Alabama coast could devastate the ecology and economy for a long period, said Steven Picou, an Orange Beach resident and a professor of sociology at the University of South Alabama. Picou has spent 21 years studying the effects of the Exxon Valdez oil spill on Prince William Sound.

Picou said the 1989 Alaska spill still affects wildlife, and the Gulf Coast is in danger if the oil reaches this area.

"We have very precious and fragile wetlands and coastal areas, and it's going to be a serious tragedy if they become inundated with oil," he said. "Also, there's the economic impact. If oil reaches the beaches between Pensacola Beach and Dauphin Island, it's going to absolutely shut down the tourism industry."

At Gulf State Park in Gulf Shores, naturalist Kelly Reetz said she was concerned about the potential for a large-scale oil spill.

"There is no facility here, at the Gulf State Park, Orange Beach, Gulf Shores, on the whole island, to handle a large number of birds or other wildlife that would be affected by something like that, if it comes in, when it comes in," she said.