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Gulf oil spill

Dennis Coday | Jun. 4, 2010

Residents of Plaquemines Parish line up May 25 to apply for cleanup work with British Petroleum during a town hall meeting held in Boothville, La. (CNS/Reuters/Lee Celano)

ST. BERNARD, LA. -- The burden of six weeks of dashed hopes and unrelenting uncertainty clearly shows on the weathered faces of fishermen and their families here in this coastal Louisiana parish, 15 miles southeast of New Orleans.

?I don?t know what to do anymore. I got a boat ... but I can?t fish,? said Wesley Perez Sr., who has been working the Gulf of Mexico waters for fish, shrimp, oysters and crabs since 1965.

The 63-year-old Perez spoke with NCR June 1, on ?Day 43? of the BP oil spill, which has already caused almost incalculable economic and environmental disruption.

Said Perez: ?They talk about that Exxon-Valdez [the oil tanker that ran aground in Alaska in 1989]. It took 20 years for the fishing to come back. I don?t know. This oil spill is worse than that one was. So 20 years from now, I?m sure I won?t be fishing, if I?m even here 20 years from now. ...To me, I?m pretty much out of business, I guess.?

Since the April 20 BP oil well blowout occurred, Perez has been out in the Gulf only three days -- and that was as a BP contract employee laying boom to restrain the spill.A tour set up by Catholic Charities for reporters revealed that the Gulf disaster has already radically changed the lives of many people here with the likelihood these changes will last for many years to come.

In community after community throughout this region people are devastated, living day to day, wondering how they will fare in the weeks and months to come. Meanwhile, Catholic Charities is providing invaluable services to assist the needy.

Echoing a sentiment widely expressed here, Fr. John Arnone, pastor of St. Bernard Parish, said that when BP?s ?top kill? procedure failed that it was ?like a knife through the heart? of the community. He said he delivered the news of the failure to some in his congregation during his May 29 Saturday evening homily.

?Some people had not heard that yet and there was a huge sigh of just unbelief. Our hope had been built up that this was our best chance. ... We were kind of drug along, and then, boom, it?s not [working].?

Arnone described his feeling of helplessness ?We?re just sitting ducks,? he said. ?We just want it stopped. Because we know that once it is stopped, it?s still going to be long road for recovery and cleaning.?

George Jackson has been crabbing, shrimping and fishing in these coastal waters for 35 years. He owns his own boat and has two deck hands. Unable to articulate his feelings, he simply said that this should be his busiest and most productive time of year. But he sits idle and losing money by the day.

?I am a commercial fisherman,? Jackson, also a member of St. Bernard Parish, said matter-of-factly. ?I should be making from $2,000 to $3,000 a day. When this oil spill started they told me to pick up my equipment because it was contaminated. They made me dump all my seafood overboard. It cost me $1,000 to go pick up what I picked up. I still have another 200 traps left out there to pick up. That?s another $500 it?s going to cost me to go get it, but where it?s at they don?t want us out there right now.

?They opened the season back up [for certain areas], but if I put my traps out it will cost me $1,200 and tomorrow they could say it?s closed. Then I would have to pick my equipment up. I would be out of work again and it would cost me more money.?

The human fabric, which ties together this region, appears to be unraveling. Fishing here is multigenerational, tying families closely together. Jackson has three brothers, all fishermen, and his four sisters are married to fishermen. Perez?s two brothers and a nephew are boat captains. His daughter was to inherit his boat.

Jackson and Perez are among the 6,000 licensed commercial fishermen in Louisiana affected by the oil spill. They spoke while in the St. Bernard Church parking lot outside the Oil Leak Response Center set up by Catholic Charities of the New Orleans archdiocese. It is one of five centers Catholic Charities set up within days after the spill began.

Working in partnership with the Second Harvest Food Bank of Greater New Orleans and Acadiana, a Catholic-founded ecumenical organization, Catholic Charities has been distributing boxes of food and food vouchers to families in need. It can also assist families with up to $200 for rent, utilities or other expenses.

Martin Gutierrez, executive director of neighborhood and community services for New Orleans Catholic Charities, said that by purchasing food gift cards and food vouchers from local stores that Catholic Charities is attempting to support the local economy at a time of special need.

He spoke about the widening circles of hurting fish-dependent people and industries, including fishermen, and ice factory, bait shop and marina workers, and onward.

The Louisiana state agency of social services estimates that 47,000 people are in need of immediate assistance because of the oil disaster.

Meanwhile, BP last month donated $1 million to support the emergency response work of Catholic Charities and Second Harvest.

BP is also helping fishermen by paying compensation claims -- up to $5,000 for boat captains and $2,500 for deck hands -- and by hiring fisherman and their boats to aid in the containment and cleanup efforts.

However, these programs have had limited success, said Tom Costanza, executive director of the justice and peace office for New Orleans Catholic Charities. According to Costanza, as of June 1, some 25,000 people had filed claims with BP. Of that number, 89 percent have received acknowledgement of the filed claim. Of those, 49 percent have received a check.

Costanza said those filing claims face numerous obstacles and so Catholic Charities is helping with the process. He explains that many fishermen operate on a cash basis and lack adequate documentation to show losses. Literacy is another issue, he said. Among the fishermen are large populations whose first -- and sometimes only -- language is Vietnamese, Cambodian or Croatian.

Perez said he looked into filing a claim with BP but has not done so yet.

The amount of announced subsidy does not impress him, Jackson said. ?That little $5,000 ain?t nothing. It?s like a drop in the bucket.?

Jackson, like Perez, has worked for BP laying oil restraining booms, part of what is called the Vessels Opportunity Program. Each worked three days in the last month -- a small fraction of the revenue they had already lost.

?We already know that the Vessels Opportunity Program is nowhere near the scale it could be,? Costanza said. ?There are about a thousand men who have applied and [BP has] only hired a few hundred. So we know the scale has to be ramped up tenfold to actually employ the boat captains and the deck hands.?

And that boom work has its risks. Jackson was checking booms in the gulf when, at one point, he was splashed full-faced. His skin burned, he said, and he was knocked down. Jackson doesn?t know for certain what caused the burn, but he thinks it was the oil and a dispersant, a chemical sprayed into the oil to help break it up.

After the burning stopped, he recalled he developed a headache and it grew worse through the day into the evening when, he said, ?I had a headache so bad I couldn?t keep my head up.?

The next day he saw a BP doctor. ?They took all my information and checked me out and said nothing was really wrong,? Jackson said, adding that the headaches have continued and his equilibrium has been off. The doctor, he said, gave him some pills and told him ?to come back in a week and don?t go on a boat for a week.?

Costanza said local long-term needs will be many. He said he has already spoken with the national office of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development to secure funding for organizing work by the United Commercial Fisherman?s Association and the South Plaquemines Parish United Fishermen Cooperative.

He is also seeking funding for local organizations that monitor air, soil quality and environmental impact so they can act as watchdogs on data coming from the government and corporate interests.

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