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Drawn-out disaster frays nerves

Rich Heffern | Jun. 8, 2010

Workers contracted by British Petroleum scrape oil from a beach May 23 in Port Fourchon, La., after it was inundated by the oil spill from the Deepwater Horizon rig. (CNS/Reuters/Lee Celano)

When Deepwater Horizon, the semi-submersible offshore oil rig contracted to London-based oil giant British Petroleum (BP), exploded April 20, killing 11 workers, oil one mile beneath it began gushing from the ocean floor.

Obama administration officials warned on May 30 that that oil eruption in the Gulf of Mexico might not be stopped until late summer, following BP?s latest unsuccessful attempt to plug the oil hole.

The impacts of the already six-week-plus ensuing oil spill on the people, economy and environment of Louisiana and other Gulf Coast states have been immediate and severe and will probably persist for decades.

Meanwhile, Catholic groups have made up the thrust of the first responders.

In response to the growing catastrophe, Catholic Charities of New Orleans opened five emergency centers in May at local churches to distribute financial aid and offer counseling to fishing families in the urban area and in communities closer to the Gulf. Financial aid comes from a $750,000 donation from BP that was paired with a $250,000 grant to the Catholic-founded Second Harvest Food Bank of greater New Orleans and Acadiana, for emergency food boxes.

Rob Gorman, director of Catholic Charities for the southwestern Louisiana diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, also reported receiving $100,000 from BP for outreach to those affected by the spill in that area.

?We have a hot line for information on claims for job losses, applying for Medicaid and food stamps,? Gorman said, ?and now we?re sending in caseworkers to go door by door to people hurt by this spill.?

Not only is fishing threatened in that diocese, which includes much of the state?s southwestern coast, but area tourism as well. ?Grand Isle in our diocese, for example, is the only inhabited barrier island in the state, home to one of the state?s few Gulf Coast beaches,? Gorman told *NCR*. ?There are 1,200 residents in winter and 20,000 to 30,000 in the summer. Tourism is the other mainstay of that economy.

?Even carpenters are out of work as absent owners have called off renovation work on their summer cabins. This is the start of tourist season and there?s been nothing but cancellation notices coming in. Now we have two caseworkers on Grand Isle going out through the population there, spreading the word that there is help for rent, mortgage payments, utilities, food. People are still trying to make it on their own though. There?s always been the sense that if things get really bad the fisher can catch what he or she needs to survive but now even that is in doubt.?

Gorman said coast dwellers wait anxiously to see how this will all play out. ?We don?t know what will survive, what will bounce back. I have worked since 1982 with other environmentalists in the area to preserve coastal wetlands and the barrier islands. Now we?re seeing the potential to undo much of what we accomplished. Forty-two percent of wetlands in the United States are in Louisiana It?s a national treasure.?

Gorman said the coming storm season in the Gulf is predicted to be severe and that adds to the worries. ?When storm surges come, people?s houses get filled with mud. That?s bad enough. Now it will be oil that has to be removed.

?What?s more the hurricanes come in pairs now,? Gorman said.

Another social service agency helping people in rural south Louisiana is the Southern Mutual Help Association. Its rural recovery task force, formed in response to Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav and Ike, has been re-geared to help Louisiana?s fishers survive the unprecedented doom they are facing in the wake of the current oil spill.

Providence Sr. Helen Vinton is the association?s assistant executive director. She told NCR: ?The traditional, multicultural and multigenerational Louisiana fisher?s life and livelihood are now on hold and at stake. Income has ceased and future earnings are bleak as the fisher considers the impact the petroleum-based pollution will have on the breeding grounds of future seasons? crops.?

Louisiana fishers are being offered contracts by BP to assist in oil cleanup efforts, and ?in their desperation, they are accepting offers containing language and conditions that they are not accustomed to dealing with. Some are unwittingly putting their health and their watercraft vessels in jeopardy,? Vinton said.

She?s heard people say: ? ?If we can?t fish, we will have to go to work.? This is how they describe a job where they get up at 2 a.m. to go out and don?t return home until 10 p.m., and they do that day in and day out. But they value their freedom; they are their own boss. They?re innovative and good at making things work. These people have PhDs in the ecology of the place.?

Now there?s a real sense of despair, she said. ?They tell me: ?Fishing is not only a source of income but I am a fifth generation of fishers. This will be the end.? ?

The only economy left now in rural southern Louisiana is either picking up scrap iron and selling it to recycling firms or hiring on with BP for the cleanup. ?Typically the fishers? smaller boats go out and pick up booms from bigger boats that have been filled with oil. BP gives out suits, boots, gloves, goggles, but no respirators. Who knows how long the health effects will endure?? Vinton asked.

?So much is unknown,? she said. ?If the marshes in rural Louisiana are poisoned so are the wildlife. One fisherman I know, Charles, told me: ?We offered to put out booms to keep the oil out of the marshes. BP said the oil was 10 miles out, not too worry, so we didn?t put out the protection we needed.? ?

What?s more, fish and ocean experts had been saying all winter that this fishing season would be the best ever, that the fisheries had fully recovered from earlier depredations, Vinton said, ?so folks borrowed from banks to fix up boats, to buy new equipment and nets.?

?It was an accident just waiting to happen. But the oil companies have held sway here for too many years and now their carelessness has caused unimaginable disaster.?

As the cleanup continues, environmental scientists warn that prolonged exposure to crude oil and the chemical dispersants used to control the oil spread is a public health danger. Wilma Subra, a Louisiana chemist who has served as a consultant to the Environmental Protection Agency, said there was growing anecdotal evidence that locals were falling ill after exposure to tiny airborne particles of crude. Air quality data released earlier by the government suggested the presence of chemicals that -- while still within legal limits -- could be dangerous. But Subra complained that the EPA was not releasing all data it had gathered from BP. Subra, a Catholic, lives in New Iberia, La.

?Every time the wind blows from the southeast to the shore, people are being made sick,? she told *NCR*. ?It causes severe headaches, nausea, respiratory problems, burning eyes and sore throats. Long-term health effects include neurological disorders and cancer.?

Workers recruited for the cleanup -- fishers and shrimpers put out of work because of the spill -- receive training and wear protective gear. However, the protective clothing does not include respirators, which Subra says violates safety regulations for workers exposed to dangerous chemicals.

Subra is concerned about the devastation of the wetlands environment as well. ?Vegetation is being killed, soil washes away. Turtles, dolphins, nesting birds are in big trouble, as the oil moves into the estuaries and contaminates water.

?Yet the oil industry is still in high gear. Environmentalists here are banding together. We want to be part of the process when BP or any other oil company makes decisions that affect us.?

?It?s the biggest environmental disaster of our time and it?s not even over yet,? said the marine toxicologist Dr. Susan Shaw, director of the Marine Environmental Research Institute based in Maine. She has been diving among the damage and is horrified by the contamination caused by BP?s continued use of dispersants. ?They?ve been used at such a high volume that it?s unprecedented. The worst of these -- Corexit 9527 -- is the one they?ve been using most. That ruptures red blood cells and causes fish to bleed. With 800,000 gallons of this, we can only imagine the death that will be caused.?

According to Shaw, plankton and smaller shrimps coated in these toxic chemicals will be eaten by larger fish,

passing the deadly mix up the food chain. ?This is dismantling the food web, piece by piece,? she said. ?We?ll see dead bodies soon. Sharks, dolphins, sea turtles, whales. The impact on predators will be seen in a short time because the food web will be impacted from the bottom up.?

Corrosive uncertainty and anxiety about the economy and environment have been heightened by the past five years, which have been tough for Louisiana. Now the drawn-out nature of the present disaster frays nerves even more. ?Nobody knows what?s going to happen,? said one coast resident. ?This has never happened before.?

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- No clue how to deal with this enormous spill [5], 'A pitiful comment on the lack of preparedness of the oil industry' (June 9)
- Drawn-out disaster frays nerves [6], ?We don?t know what will survive, what will bounce back? (June 8)
- Oil spill protesting New Orleans style [7], BP exec says company 'committed' to restoring Gulf Coast (June 7)
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