

**Testimony of Billy Nungesser
Plaquemines Parish President
Before the Subcommittee on State, Local, and Private Sector Preparedness and
Integration
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Oil Spill Impact on Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana



Plaquemines Parish is located in the southeast corner of Louisiana, the peninsula runs 100 miles long on both sides of the Mississippi River. French explorers arrived at the mouth of the Mississippi in 1699. The inhabitants from that point forward have lived off the richness of the land and waters. Towns such as La Balize, Port Eads, Burrwood, and Pilottown thrived at the mouth of the Mississippi River. The parish has rebuilt several times in the 20th Century and early 21st Century after hurricanes made landfall in Plaquemines, or nearby. The Great Hurricane of 1915, Hurricane Betsy, Hurricane Camille, Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Rita, Hurricane Gustav, Hurricane Ike, Plaquemines Parish has the most combined land and water area in the State of Louisiana. Plaquemines Parish also has more coastline than any other parish in the State of Louisiana. As of the census of 2000, the population was 26,757 people, 9,021 households, and 7,000 families residing in the parish. That was the largest population in the parish's history. The Census Bureau's 2009 population estimate for Plaquemines Parish was 20,942.

Oil Impact

Deepwater Horizon caught fire on April 20, 2010. Over the next week concerns grew about the effects of oil to Plaquemines Parish, both short term and long term.

Oil **sheen** was first reported in Plaquemines Parish on May 7, 2010 in East Bay and West Bay.

Tar Balls first washed ashore on May 12, 2010 at South Pass.

Thick oil first arrived on May 17, 2010 at Pass A Loutre.

On May 22, 2010 brown pelicans, the state bird, were found oiled in Cat Bay in Plaquemines Parish.

On June 3, 2010 Brown Pelicans were found completely coated in thick oil on East Grande Terre Island in Plaquemines Parish. The Brown Pelican was removed from the endangered species list in November 2009.

Since May 7th, oil has been found in East Bay, West Bay, South Pass, Southwest Pass, Redfish Bay, Garden Island Bay, Four Bayou Pass, Barataria Bay, Bay Ronquille, Cat Bay, Cat Island, Pass A Loutre, Lake Machias, Stone Island, Rattlesnake Bayou, Lake Washington, East Grand Terre Island, Wilkinson Bay, Bay Ronquille, and Redfish Bay.

Fishing: Professional & Recreational

In 2009, the total number of commercial fishing licenses issued in Plaquemines Parish was **811**.

771 were residents, 14 non-resident, and 26 senior commercial. Plaquemines sold 6.26% of all commercial fishing licenses; only Terrebonne (13.83%), Jefferson (9.1%) and Lafourche (7.68%) sold more commercial licenses.

In 2009 the total number of recreational licenses issued was **4,944**. 3,678 were resident recreational and 1,266 were non-resident.

The 811 commercial fishermen and 4,944 recreational fishermen operate out of nine (9) marinas and four (4) boat harbors throughout Plaquemines Parish—Wilson's Marina, Myrtle Grove Marina, Delta Marina, Joshua's Marina, Lloyd's Riverside, Yellow Cotton Bay Marina, Beshel Boat Launch, Venice Marina, Cypress Cove Marina, Empire Boat Harbor, Buras Boat Harbor, Venice Boat Harbor, and Pointe A La Hache Boat Harbor.

An estimated 25,000 people come to Plaquemines Parish each year for recreational fishing.

Immediate Economic Impact

Two oyster harvest areas on the East Bank of Plaquemines Parish were closed at sunset on April 30, 2010. Since then, all shrimp zones, oyster harvest beds, and recreational and commercial fishing

have been closed at some point—both inland and offshore. The opening and closures change a near daily basis. To put in perspective the resulting damage of the oil spill on Plaquemines Parish’s economy, view the production figures for both Plaquemines Parish and the state of Louisiana in 2009:

	Landings (lbs)	Value (\$)	Ranking by Parish
2009 Plaquemines Parish Oysters	5,220,830	\$19,095,596	1 st
2009 Plaquemines Parish Shrimp	19,178,269	\$19,590,825	3 rd
2009 Plaquemines Parish Crabs	1,656,076	\$1,083,228	11 th
2009 Statewide Oysters	14,799,576	\$50,215,899	
2009 Statewide Shrimp	110,159,892	\$117,300,725	
2009 Statewide Crabs	51,780,214	\$52,021,448	

Environmental Impact

Louisiana's tidal shoreline is 7,721 miles. Plaquemines Parish’s shoreline is approximately 1,900 miles.

-Plaquemines parish has a total area of 2,429 square miles, of which, 845 square miles of it is land and 1,584 square miles of it (65.22%) is water.

-Plaquemines Parish has a total of 901,817 acres--590,160 acres are land; 271,657 acres are large water areas, streams, lakes, bays, sounds, bayous and Gulf of Mexico. This information is from the soil survey of Plaquemines Parish in 2000.

Of the 271,657 acres of Plaquemines Parish wetlands, more than 3,000 have been impacted by oil at the time of this report (June 7, 2010).

The wetlands are a unique ecosystem which also acts as a hurricane buffer. Oil is currently killing the marsh grass and Roseau cane which hold the soil in place. Once the grass dies, wave action will erode the soil and the marsh will be lost forever, and the state will lose its natural hurricane barrier.

Plaquemines Parish has two federal wildlife refuges: Breton National Wildlife Refuge and Delta National Wildlife Refuge.

Breton National Wildlife Refuge is located in southeastern Louisiana in the offshore Breton Islands and Chandeleur Islands. The refuge was established in 1904 through executive order of President Theodore Roosevelt and is the second-oldest refuge in the National Wildlife Refuge System. Breton NWR provides habitat for colonies of nesting wading birds and seabirds, as well as wintering shorebirds and waterfowl. Twenty-three species of seabirds and shorebirds frequently use the refuge, and 13 species nest on the various islands. The most abundant nesters are Brown Pelicans, Laughing Gulls, and Royal, Caspian, and Sandwich Terns. Waterfowl winter near the refuge islands and use the adjacent shallows, marshes, and sounds for feeding and for protection during inclement weather.

The Delta National Wildlife Refuge is located 10 miles south of Venice, Louisiana along the Mississippi River. The 48,000-acre refuge was purchased in 1935 with the primary purpose to provide sanctuary and habitat to wintering waterfowl. Delta NWR supports a wide variety of wildlife species. Tens of thousands of wintering waterfowl take advantage of the rich food resources

found in the delta. Large numbers of other bird species can be found on the refuge, with numbers peaking during the spring and fall migrations. Large numbers of wading birds nest on the refuge, and thousands of shorebirds can be found on tidal mudflats and deltaic splays. Numerous furbearers and game mammals are year-round residents, and the marshes and waterways provide year-round and seasonal habitat for a diversity of fish and shellfish species. The marshes and waterways of the Delta NWR support a diversity of fish species. Speckled trout, redfish, flounder, blue crabs and shrimp are important saltwater species found on the refuge. Catfish, largemouth bass, and various sunfish species are found in the freshwater areas of the refuge. Delta NWR is an extremely important nursery area for both fresh and saltwater fish species. The marsh habitat on the refuge is classified as Paulustrine Emergent Wetlands. Two basic marsh zones occur within the habitat: fresh marsh nearest the main tributaries, and brackish marsh near the Gulf of Mexico. The fertile soils, vegetative composition, and shallow water wetland environment offers outstanding recreational opportunities such as fishing, wildlife observation, photography, hunting, and primitive camping. The fertile soils, vegetative composition and shallow water environment create a highly productive habitat for fish and wildlife.

Marine Life

Some of the fish native to Plaquemines Parish include speckled trout, white trout, flounder, redfish, drum, bass, catfish, sheephead, pompano, tarpon, bluefin tuna, yellowfin tuna, blackfin tuna, blue marlin, white marlin, sailfish, varieties of grouper, wahoo, amberjack, barracuda, cobia, jack crevalle, Spanish mackerel, king mackerel, snapper, ladyfish, dolphin, with other not listed.

Long Term Seafood Threat

Oysters spawn annually during the months of May and June. The oil may prevent oyster spat from attaching to new shells, thereby disrupting the reproduction cycle. The industry is already in a state of repair after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The seafood industry has suffered somewhat in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. About half the shrimping and shellfish fleets were lost. Even with the rebuilding of oyster beds post-Katrina, Plaquemines Parish was the top oyster producing parish in the state of Louisiana in 2009, landing 5,220,830 pounds of oysters valued at \$19,095,506.

Brown Pelicans were on the endangered species list from 1973-2009.

The economic impact of the oil spill extends beyond the fishermen, the ripple effect smashes through the entire community with potential to destroy lives and cause the community to collapse. Bait shops, boat repairmen, engine repair services, restaurants, lodges, seafood shops, corner stores, gas stations, banks, etc. all are in a financial crunch because of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Here's an example to explain the trickle down from the docks to the heart of the community: when the commercial fishermen are unable to fish, gas stations and corner stores are immediately affected because the demand for ice, drinks, snacks, and fuel plummets. The middle man between the fishermen and retailers/restaurant gets shut down. The seafood shops and restaurants, that specifically sell the produce, are now handicapped, wiping away service industry jobs held by parish residents. The economic fallout is so far reaching that a number cannot be placed on it. Plaquemines Parish is a community of approximately 20,942 residents with 4,944 recreational fishermen, 811 commercial fishermen, 51 restaurants, nine marinas, four boat harbors, and eight hotels/motels. Aside from the financial impacts, the oil spill ultimately changes the way of life in Louisiana for the time being, with potential to offset it for decades.