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Gulf residents fear being forgotten along with oil spill

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Clean-up operations have provided an economic boost to Gulf Coast towns devastated by the oil spill, but with BP aiming to soon seal the well, local workers fear they'll be forgotten just as the brunt of their hardship sets in.

Eight weeks ago, marina and motel owner Dudley "Butch" Gaspard sat down for a seafood lunch with US President Barack Obama in Grand Isle.

Obama visited the coastal town of just 1500 residents twice in a seven-day period in the aftermath of the spill, walking along the town's closed beaches and examining them for oil.

"There are small companies like this across the Gulf and we need to make sure their voices are heard," Obama told the media, over a shrimp and seafood lunch with Gaspard and four other local business owners.

Now, Gaspard has taped a photograph of him shaking hands with the president on the wall inside his marina store underneath a picture of a 40-foot sperm whale, right next to the garbage bin.

"That's where it belongs," said Gaspard, referring to the photograph next to the garbage bin.

BP rented all 39 rooms from Gaspard at his Sand Dollar motel for its cleanup workers, when the disaster began, and about 200 cleanup workers visit Gaspard's marina store every day to pick up food and supplies like life vests and radio equipment.

But even with the booming cleanup trade, Gaspard's business is down 25 percent on last year, he said, and now that the cleanup workers are beginning to head home, he's facing the prospect of running a business in an empty town.

He's also worried that, as happened after Hurricane Katrina (2005), the world's attention will shift away from Grand Isle just as the toughest times for residents set in.

On Friday night, a crowd of 50 heavily tattooed cleanup contractors swamped the cash registers inside the Sureway supermarket in downtown Grand Isle. Friday is payday, and they were there to cash their checks, waiting patiently for just one cashier at a window next to the office.

"Y'all play nice," said supermarket owner Shelly Landry, emerging from the office clutching four one-inch stacks of 100-dollar bills. Landry took the money to a cash register and began paying out on checks in a new line for the contractors.

"Welcome to Friday night," said Landry. "I never thought I'd be doing this. I used to sell green beans to offshore oil boats, and groceries to grandma and grandpa when they were here on vacation, spoiling the grandkids. But guess who ain't here, thanks to BP?"

Grand Isle has become a regional headquarters for cleanup crews filling all the motel rooms in town.

But the once booming summer tourist trade has been wiped out, as seafood and oyster shacks sit closed, and other local restaurants struggle to attract customers with menus edited to remove all local seafood.

All the beaches on Grand Isle remain closed, and swimming in the Gulf remains prohibited. But the state reopened 2,400 square miles of Louisiana waters for fishing on Friday, with the Food and Drug Administration saying the seafood in the water will be safe for human consumption.

Environmentalists, however, are concerned that not enough thorough testing has been done on the seafood. They say BP's use of chemical dispersants to dissipate the oil from the surface means there are lingering questions about toxicity in the fish.

Nevertheless, Grand Isle's waters are now open for fishing again and some sport fishermen are already returning to catch speckled trout and red fish.

Joel Mayer, Chase Sholmire, and Jason Badame arrived on Friday night from the small Louisiana town of St. Amite, towing their fishing boat on a trailer and rigging up their fishing poles. They were unconcerned about the oil spill's impact on fish safety.

"Put it this way, we catch fish out in the (polluted) Mississippi River and eat 'em," said Sholmire.

"Maybe my kids will come out looking a little funny... but I'm going to be fine. They wouldn't let you fish in it if it was too dirty to eat. If it was going to affect you that much, then they wouldn't let you catch it."

Bridge Side Marina owner Dodie Vegas said her business is down 80 percent because of the disaster, but that she is optimistic, seeing the return of those like the three young fishermen from St. Amite.

The Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing board said Friday that consumer confidence is only likely to return after an extensive campaign to "bore the consumer with good news about the safety of our seafood."

"I sure would like to swim in that water," said Jeanette Palmisano, who has been vacationing in Grand Isle every summer for the last decade and was looking out at the ocean from a pier at Grand Isle State Park on Friday evening.

Palmisano hopes to return to Grand Isle again next year, but is pessimistic about BP's ability to clean up the beach and return a sense of normality to the town by then.

"They really messed it up down here," she said.

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