Gulf of Mexico Seafood Safety

The federal government continues to lead an aggressive, comprehensive, coordinated, multi-agency program to ensure the safety of Gulf seafood.To ensure all seafood that goes to market is not tainted by oil or dispersant and is safe to eat, the process includes active monitoring of the areas where seafood is caught, frequent testing of seafood caught in the Gulf, and inspection of facilities that process and sell Gulf seafood. The system is working: there is no evidence that even one piece of tainted seafood made it to market.

Sandra O'Neill, a fish biologist from NOAA's Northwest Fisheries Science Center, prepares a tissue sample for sensory and chemical analysis.

The program includes the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) along with the Gulf state and local officials, and the seafood industry, and is closely monitoring the effects of the Deepwater Horizon BP oil spill on seafood safety.

Seafood in the marketplace is safe to eat.

Extensive steps are being taken to ensure that remains the case. Closing oiled areas to fishing was the first and most important tool for preventing the entry of tainted fish and fishery products into the marketplace. The federal government took a precautionary approach, closing areas where there was oil on the surface or sub-surface, as well as areas NOAA projected would become oiled. As an extra precaution, a five-mile buffer was included as part of the closed area. The Coast Guard and NOAA have monitored the closed federal areas to ensure there is no fishing within those areas, and have taken enforcement action against vessels that violated closure boundaries.

Areas were reopened only after all seafood caught there tested clean

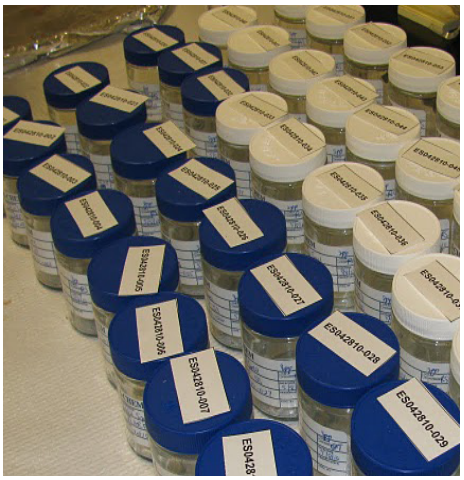
NOAA and FDA, working with the health and fisheries authorities from the Gulf States, has developed a protocol to ensure any area that has been closed to fishing is safe prior to being reopened. That process starts once an area is free of oil. Following such a determination, samples from the area must pass sensory and chemical testing conducted by the FDA and NOAA.

NOAA Administrator Dr. Jane Lubchenco (right), NOAA Fisheries Assistant Administrator Eric Schwaab (left) and Council on Environmental Quality Chair Nancy Sutley (middle) help sort seafood samples for on-shore testing.

Federal seafood safety experts have implemented a rigorous, risk-based sampling regime.

Every seafood sample from reopened waters has undergone rigorous testing for oil and dispersants – and every sample from reopened waters has passed those tests.

Kenneth Powell, a chemist with the National Seafood Inspection Laboratory, and Mark Myers, a fish biologist from the NOAA Northwest Fisheries Science Center, prepare tissue samples for chemical analysis.



Empty jars with labels sit ready to be filled with seafood samples and mailed to NOAA's Northwest Fisheries Science Center in Seattle, where chemical analysis for oil and dispersant is performed.

Tests show seafood is safe from dispersants

NOAA and FDA developed a chemical test to detect traces of the dispersant in fish tissue. Every sample was far below the safety threshold established by FDA.

Because of the physical and chemical properties of the dispersant used in the Gulf, scientists knew fish, crustaceans and shellfish could metabolize and excrete dispersant, and that it was unlikely to accumulate in fish tissue. To demonstrate this and to support consumer confidence, NOAA and FDA developed a chemical test that could detect traces of the dispersant in fish tissue. In October 2010, the agencies announced the results: every sample tested was far below the safety threshold established by FDA, and over 99 percent of the thousands of samples tested showed no detectable residue.

The seafood test results are all publicly available, and should help Americans buy Gulf seafood with confidence: the seafood has consistently tested 100 to 1000 times lower than the safety thresholds established by the FDA for the residues of oil contamination, and even lower for dispersant contamination.

How seafood is sampled and tested:

Samples are collected from closed fishing areas and are brought to shore for immediate testing before those areas are reopened. NOAA has also collected baseline specimens and has sampled outside the closure.

Sensory analysis:

Seafood samples undergo rigorous sensory testing by expert panels at NOAA's seafood testing laboratory in Pascagoula, Mississippi. These experts have been trained to detect oil in concentrations of one part per million, an amount that is invisible to the human eye in water or seafood, and below the level of concern for human health. Each piece of seafood undergoing sensory analysis is tested for raw odor, cooked odor, and cooked flavor by multiple experts.

Chemical analysis:

Both NOAA and the FDA are performing chemical testing on seafood products from the Gulf at labs across the country. This analysis tests for both oil and dispersant and ensures that seafood products caught in the Gulf are safe for the consumer.

Dockside sampling:

In an effort to add an additional level of screening, NOAA has implemented a targeted sampling program that tests fish as they are brought into the docks from commercial fishing vessels.

Risk-based seafood processor monitoring:

FDA has implemented a risk-based surveillance sampling program targeting seafood products at Gulf Coast seafood processors – targeting oysters, crabs and shrimp, which could retain contaminants longer than finfish. This sampling provides verification that seafood on the market is safe.

To learn more about seafood safety testing and to see all the official information about seafood including how seafood is tested and test results, visit the seafood safety website at www.noaa.gov/deepwaterhorizon/data/seafood_safety.html. If you have questions or concerns about seafood, or to report any seafood you suspect of being contaminated for any reason, call 1-888-INFO-FDA.