

Consumers Can Be Confident in the Safety of Gulf Seafood

Co-Authors:

Eric Schwaab, NOAA's Assistant Administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service
Donald Kraemer, Deputy Director, FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition
Dr. Jimmy Guidry, Louisiana State Health Officer, Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals

As is the case with so many parts of the response to the BP/Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the seafood safety program put in place during this crisis was unprecedented. The system set up to keep tainted seafood out of circulation worked.

At the top of the list for NOAA, FDA and the Gulf states has always been ensuring public safety and the integrity of Gulf seafood. Federal waters in the Gulf were first closed to fishing on May 2, and closures increased in federal and state waters as the oil spread. At the height of the spill, more than a third of the federal waters in the Gulf were closed to fishing. With the Coast Guard, we enforced the closure boundaries, and together we developed and carried out a comprehensive plan for testing Gulf seafood.

Driven by science and with human health as the highest priority, the extensive sampling and testing plan allowed areas to open only when every piece of seafood sampled there passed both sensory and chemical testing. We were precautionary on purpose: when there was a *potential* for tainted seafood, waters were closed, and they could only be opened when we could *prove* the seafood from those waters was safe to eat.

Scientists knew already, from real-world experiences (like the Exxon *Valdez* disaster) and laboratory research, that fish can metabolize and excrete oil. Knowing that finfish can clear it from their bodies within days, shrimp and crabs take a little longer, and shellfish like oysters take the longest time, we tested these various types of seafood individually to make sure we didn't miss anything. The results of the tests, all publicly available, 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.

The large-scale use of dispersants to help oil rapidly break down in the environment was one of the many unique aspects of this spill and response. Scientists expected seafood would metabolize and excrete dispersant and that it was unlikely to be taken up by seafood in large quantities, but to support consumer confidence, NOAA and FDA worked to develop a chemical test to detect traces of the dispersant in fish tissue. In October, 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.

We saw firsthand the devastating impact the BP/Deepwater Horizon disaster had on the lives and livelihoods of the Gulf fishing community. We had many opportunities to work with the fishermen and seafood processors throughout the region, and we witnessed their steadfast commitment to ensuring the safety and wholesomeness of their catch every day. We continue to be thankful for their cooperation through the often challenging process of closing and reopening affected waters.

Because of the hard work and cooperation of Gulf fishermen, seafood processors, and state, local and federal health and fisheries officials, American consumers can feel confident in the quality and safety of Gulf seafood.