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## Gulf seafood must pass the smell test

By *Yan Q. Mui and David A. Fahrenthold*

Tuesday, July 13, 2010

PASCAGOULA, MISS. -- Expert sniffer Steve Wilson lifted the cover off a Pyrex bowl and fanned the aroma of the raw red snapper sitting inside it toward him on a recent afternoon at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's lab here. He quickly replaced the cover and stepped back, letting the scent register for a few seconds.

VIDEO 



**Oil spill video: Seafood sniffers smell out oily fish**

Commercial fishing continues in the Gulf as the oil slick continues to spread. But how do we know the fish we eat is safe? It appears the nose knows as seafood inspectors learn how to sniff out tainted product from oysters to shrimp and fish.


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**Conclusion: No oil.**




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Wilson, chief quality officer for NOAA's seafood inspection program, oversees a panel of seven olfactory experts from the agency and the Food and Drug Administration who have been tasked with ensuring that seafood from the Gulf of Mexico is safe to eat. The team also will help determine when the thousands of square miles of federal waters that have been closed to commercial fishing since the BP oil spill nearly three months ago can be reopened.

This puts the fate of the seafood industry in their hands. Or, rather, their noses.

"It's a very specialized skill set," Wilson said. He later added, "There are people who just can't smell."

Members of the team -- whose identities NOAA has kept secret, for fear they could become targets if waters do not reopen quickly, allowing fishing to resume -- do not work alone. Seafood that passes the smell test also is subjected to chemical analysis at a NOAA lab in Seattle for traces of the hydrocarbons that make up the crude oil gushing into the gulf.

But those tests can take at least three to five days to complete, while so-called "expert sensory assessors" can sniff through as many as 36 samples each day and detect contaminants down to one part per million. All seven have to sniff and rate each sample. Wilson said the sniffers are accurate about 80 percent of the time.

NOAA said it is focusing most of its tests on seafood outside closed waters to ensure that it remains safe for consumption. No tainted seafood has been found in those areas, agency officials said.

"So far, it's adequate," said Walt Dickhoff, who runs the chemical testing team in Seattle. "We're just monitoring it to be certain."

About 34 percent of the gulf has been closed to commercial fishing by federal order. States control waters nearer to shore, and Louisiana has shut down 76 percent of the 2.1 million acres of water where oysters are harvested, according to state officials.

Officials with the state's Department of Health and Hospitals said the closures are their first line of defense against having contaminated seafood enter the market, but some fishermen -- many of whom have been out of work for more than two months -- have criticized the efforts as too aggressive.

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In Houma, La., Mike Voisin, owner of the Motivait oyster harvesting and processing business, said he understands the restrictions, but "I'm on the side of don't like it." Of his company's 400,000 acres of oyster farms, only 3,000 remain open, he said.

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## Gulf seafood must pass the smell test

The state wildlife and fisheries department dispatches about 50 boats daily to patrol the borders of the closed waters. So far, more than 460 criminal citations have been issued for commercial fishing in closed areas, while 210 warnings have been issued. Fishermen have dumped 23,385 pounds of shrimp, 531 pounds of crabs, 262 trout and eight mangrove snappers caught in closed waters.

**VIDEO**

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Commercial fishing continues in the Gulf as the oil slick continues to spread. But how do we know the fish we eat is safe? It appears the nose knows as seafood inspectors learn how to sniff out tainted product from oysters to shrimp and fish.

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Once on shore, fishermen are required to document where their catches were made, and state inspectors

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review their records four times a year during unannounced visits. But the paperwork is not foolproof: If fishermen slip past patrol boats, they could easily falsify the records to say their haul is from open waters.

"You have to believe what they put out here," said Gary Lopinto, a seafood program manager for Louisiana's health department.

Lopinto was one of about 60 seafood safety workers from across the coast to train at the NOAA center at Pascagoula in the art of the sniff. NOAA officials say they will play a critical role in quickly identifying tainted seafood in the field and were trained to smell contaminants down to 10 parts per million.

At the NOAA lab, Lopinto was taught to sniff cucumbers, watermelon or even canned corn to clear his nostrils. But this is the real world. Amid the din of heavy machinery grading and sorting oysters at the Motivait processing plant, Lopinto neutralized his nose by smelling his sleeve. Then he scooped a jiggy oyster out of its shell and held it up to his moustachioed face. He sniffed.

"If there's any detection of oil, you're gonna got a nasal sensation . . . or maybe a little gas smell," he said. "This, believe it or not, smells like corn to me."

If any oil-tainted seafood does escape detection, people who ate it would most likely suffer gastrointestinal discomfort and problems such as diarrhea, said Shaun Kennedy of the National Center for Food Protection and Defense at the University of Minnesota. Kennedy said that compounds in the oil are also known to cause cancer, but that would likely require long-term exposure, not just one meal.

Kennedy said that if seriously tainted seafood did make it onto somebody's plate, the diner could probably detect the oil by its smell or taste.

"If you had a highly contaminated oyster, it wouldn't taste right," Kennedy said. "It's a fairly low risk that you would eat any heavily contaminated oyster and not realize that something's wrong with it."

The nature of this spill has made it especially difficult for scientists to forecast its impact, either on the gulf's creatures and or the humans who make them into sandwiches and gumbo. On the surface, it is not one solid black slick, but rather a scattered armada of tar balls, tar mats, orange "mousse" and rainbow sheen, spread out now across hundreds of miles of coastline and open water.

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In addition, a good deal of the oil seems to still be suspended underwater, where scientists have very little experience tracking its movements or its impacts on fish and shellfish.

Along the gulf, many fishermen are worried that the memory of the spill will cause customers to continue shying away from gulf seafood even after the well has been capped and most of the oil has been cleaned away.

"The brand 'Louisiana gulf seafood' is

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getting hit in the market. The image on their mind for everything has been 'oiled seafood,' " said Voisin, whose family's ties to Louisiana seafood can be traced back to 1770.

Seafood is a \$3 billion industry in the state, and officials are planning a \$33 million, year-long, intensive advertising campaign to promote the shrimp, crabs, oysters and redfish that are still being caught in open waters.

"South Louisiana, we rose after the Civil War and we'll rise again," Voisin said.

*Fahrenthold reported from Washington.*

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