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NOAA Modifies Fishing Closed Areas in Gulf; 93 Percent Remains Open
Designs New Process to Improve Timeliness of Closure Information

NOAA's Fisheries Service has modified the area closed to fishing in the Gulf of Mexico due to the BP oil spill, which will include federal waters seaward of Louisiana state waters in the vicinity of Timbalier Island to waters off Florida's Choctawhatchee Bay.

These changes will leave more than 93 percent of the Gulf's federal waters open for fishing, and supporting productive fisheries and tourism. The changes will take effect at 6:00 p.m. EST today.

NOAA also will expedite updates to the areas closed to fishing in the Gulf of Mexico, as well as public notice of those changes. The closure process is being improved to cut down on the red tape necessary to modify the boundaries of the closure area. And beginning today, area boundaries could be modified daily, based on where and how fast the oil spill is moving.

NOAA will provide daily updates at <http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov> by 12:00 p.m. EST. Any changes to the closed area will become effective at 6:00 p.m. EST the same day. The six-hour window is meant to give fishermen time to retrieve their gear from any areas that are about to close, and advance notice of areas that will soon open for fishing. A status message will be updated daily, even when closed area has not changed. This message will also be available on NOAA Weather Radio and by calling NOAA Fisheries southeast regional office at 727-824-5305.

"We've met with Gulf fishermen over the last few weeks and understand their need to receive rapid information," said Eric Schwaab, NOAA assistant administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service. "NOAA stands shoulder to shoulder with Gulf coast fishermen and their families during these challenging times. Providing frequent updates about closed areas will allow fishermen to make good business and recreational decisions throughout this oil spill event, and will maintain public confidence in seafood from the Gulf of Mexico."

Changes to the area closed to all fishing will be based on the present location and trajectories of the oil spill, which are affected by wind speed and direction, currents, waves, and other weather patterns. Adjustments will take into account fisher and consumer safety, while keeping open those areas not affected by the oil spill.

"Our plan is to use this new expedited process to open fisheries as well," said Roy Crabtree, NOAA's Fisheries Service southeast regional administrator. "If an area no longer exhibits oil and we determine through analysis that fish and shellfish are safe to eat, we will re-open that area to commercial and recreational fisheries."

In the meantime, NOAA strongly advises fishermen not to fish in areas where oil or oil sheens are present, even if they are outside the closed area.

Fishermen interested in being hired by BP to help clean up from the spill and deploy boom in the Gulf of Mexico should call 281-355-5511. Fishermen who wish to contact BP about a claim should call 800-440-0858.

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