

# The Oil Spill is Not Over

On August 4th 2010, the US government claimed that most of the oil that spilled in the Gulf of Mexico was “gone” and that only 26% remained. If the numbers are true - and most official reports so far have turned out to substantially underestimate the amount of oil - then the presentation of this data is somewhere between wishful thinking and outright spin. The fact is that even this report acknowledges that no more than a quarter has been recovered. A bit more has evaporated, leaving somewhere between 3 and 4 million barrels of oil still in the Gulf and on the shorelines of Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Oil that has been dispersed or dissolved is still out there, and still causing problems that are poorly understood but likely to be serious and often persistent.

A number of major impacts have already been documented including threats to endangered populations of turtles, fish, birds, and marine mammals that may well be pushed over the brink by this disaster. The future of Gulf sperm whales, Kemp’s ridley sea turtles, bluefin tuna, and other species remains unknown. Habitat loss is a real concern, particularly to low-lying bird rookeries that are likely to erode away once the oiled vegetation that holds these islands together dies off.

Now that the wellhead appears to have been capped, we must redouble efforts to understand the true impacts of this catastrophe. There is no question that some of the oil is being broken down by bacteria, but this eats up a lot of oxygen. The dead zone that plagues the Gulf each summer is already reported to be among the worst in history; what is the contribution of the Gulf oil spill to this so far, and how much worse will it get? Enormous quantities of methane have also been released, and many questions remain about the impact this has had and will continue to have on the dead zone.

The impact on commercially and recreationally important fish stocks is a huge concern, but so far this remains largely unknown. The spill began at the start of the spawning season of a large number of fish species, but little data is available regarding the impact on a whole generation of Gulf fish. Filter feeders like menhaden - by far the largest fishery in the Gulf - and oysters are extremely vulnerable to dispersed oil. Oysters may also succumb to exposure to the unusually low saline conditions brought on by the decision to increase river flows to try to push oil offshore.

“Of further concern is the impact on Gulf food webs. Wading birds rely on crabs as a food source; the oil spilled killed millions of these crabs”. Oil and dispersant has been observed in plankton, which will move quickly up the food chain. Whales and whale sharks filter enormous amounts of water and oiled plankton, but the long term impacts of this will not be understood for years. And even more poorly understood is the impact on the deep sea. Cold water coral reefs and the sponges and anemones of the sea floor provide habitat for many species, but very little exploration has yet been done to investigate the health of this critical part of the Gulf ecosystem.

At a time when we need the Obama administration to be holding BP accountable, to be undertaking and facilitating research to understand the scope of the impacts, and to implement steps to ensure that this disaster is not repeated, they instead they appear poised to repeal the moratorium on deep water drilling and are releasing reports and statements that seem more concerned with sweeping this under the rug than about dealing with the unfortunate truth that the work is just beginning, and that we will be feeling the effects of this disaster for decades to come.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

Help prevent another disaster by learning more about clean energy solutions and by taking action at [www.greenpeace.org/usa/oilspilltruth](http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/oilspilltruth)

Note: All figures stated are based on August 2010 information