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Oil spill protesting New Orleans style

Dennis Coday | Jun. 6, 2010

Dead seabird sandwiches were among the props of the Krewe of Dead Pelicans in New Orleans June 5. (photo by Dennis Coday)

NEW ORLEANS -- Frustrated with what the federal government and petroleum giant BP are doing -- or not doing -- to contain the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and to protect sensitive marine life areas, residents and tourists protested New Orleans-style June 5: they formed a krewe and threw a party.

About 500 people joined the Krewe of Dead Pelicans.(A krewe, pronounced as "crew," is an organization that puts on a parade, usually for carnival season before Lent.

Some marched dressed in costumes of threatened sea creatures. Many carried umbrellas topped with oil-soiled pelicans. They all danced to a dirge played by a brass band and chanted slogans like: "What the flook, BP" "BP lied; pelicans died" and "Stop the oil; heal the coast."

Meanwhile, commercial oyster suppliers and restaurateurs hosted the first annual New Orleans Oyster Festival in the French Quarter near the banks of the Mississippi River. The festival had been long planned as a celebration of oysters harvested in the Louisiana coastal waters, but this event took on a special meaning as many wondered if the first oyster festival might be the last.

Louisiana has about 400,000 acres of leased oyster beds. Most are threatened by the oil in the Gulf of Mexico.

The man leading the federal government's response to the oil spill in the Gulf, Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen,

warned Sunday morning that the Gulf Coast was under siege by the oil and the siege would last into the fall, even if the current efforts to contain the oil spewing from the damaged Deepwater Horizon Oil Rig prove successful.

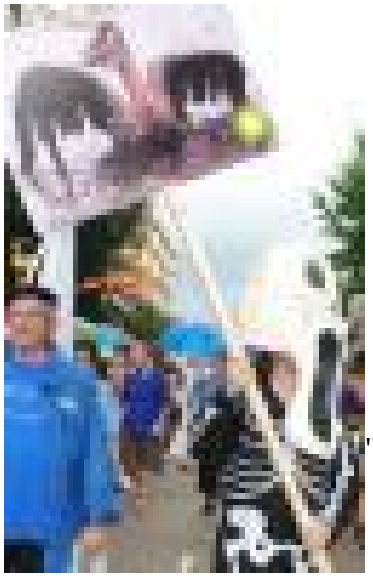
"This is a siege that is going to go on for a long time," Allen said on CBS TV's "Face the Nation" program [1]. "We are spread from south-central Louisiana over to Port Saint Joe, Florida. It is not going to end soon, and we need to have our shoulder to the wheel, do everything we can. This is a very, very, very tough problem."

"This spill is holding everybody hostage, not only economically but physically. And it has to be attacked on all fronts," Allen said.

Organizers of the Krewe of Dead Pelicans said they want oil giant BP to take full responsibility for the oil disaster that has threatened the Gulf of Mexico since April 20 and they want the federal government to sharpen its response to the disaster.

The parade wound through streets in New Orleans Warehouse District, home to art studios and galleries.

Helping promote the Krewe of Dead Pelicans was the Gulf Coast Fund for Community Renewal and Ecological Health. A statement from the group called the oil disaster "one of the most significant threats to the environment our country has faced in decades." It also asked people to stop calling the disaster an "oil spill."



"According to scientists at Tulane University, it is a river of oil flowing from the earth?s crust at a rate of 240,000 gallons per day, with the potential to keep flowing for up to three more months," the group's statement said. "It will make landfall among some of the most important fisheries and sensitive coastal ecosystems within hours. And then it will just keep coming. Put simply, it has the potential to devastate fragile coastal communities and ecosystems beyond repair."

"Action must be taken immediately to protect coastal communities and ecosystems," the statement said.

The Gulf Coast Fund, which is a special project of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, has been working with Gulf Coast communities for about five years. It is providing emergency grants to organizations on the coast engaged in first response work and monitoring economic and environmental impacts of the oil disaster.

The Krewe of Dead Pelicans parade ended with 11 minutes of silence to honor the 11 workers killed in the oil rig explosion. Then krewe members encouraged marchers to head over to the oyster festival as another way to support fisherman and businesses dependent on seafood.

The New Orleans Oyster Festival was the brainchild of Sal Sunseri, whose company P and J Oysters has been supplying oysters to New Orleans restaurants and bars for 134 years.

The festival attracted several thousand patrons Saturday and Sunday. They sampled oyster dishes from a score of booths set up by New Orleans restaurants. Jazz bands provided entertainment.

From the beginning, proceeds from the festival were earmarked for the "Save Our Coast" program of the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation, a nonprofit organization that works to protect the Gulf Coast and the Lake Pontchartrain Basin, and to support local industry workers.

This is the most productive time of year for harvesting oysters, which is why oyster fishermen feel especially hard pressed by being denied access to their leased oyster beds. Some oyster beds have been closed out of fear of contamination.

So far suppliers have been able to meet demand for the oysters, but many are uncertain how long this will last. Long-term prospects are dire.

"People naturally tend to focus on things that are most conspicuous, like oiled birds," Rich Ambrose, director of the environmental and engineering program at UCLA, told The Associated Press. "But in my opinion the impacts on fisheries will be much more severe."

Speaking to the BBC Sunday, BP chief executive officer Tony Hayward said the company's goal is to restore the Gulf of Mexico to its pre-oil spill state.

"We are going to clean-up the oil, we're going to remediate any environmental damage and we are going to return the Gulf coast to the position it was in prior to this event," said Hayward. "That's an absolute commitment."

BP's latest effort to control the oil flowing from its well on the sea floor appeared to be working Saturday and Sunday. The company reported that it was capturing about 6,000 barrels of oil a day. That would be from 20 percent to half of the amount of oil gushing from the well.

The company said Sunday it was working to increase the efficiency of its current containment cap.

[Dennis Coday is *NCR* online editor. His e-mail address is dcoday@ncronline.org.]

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