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An 'undefined' future for the Gulf

Dennis Coday | Jun. 22, 2010

Crab traps sit empty on a dock in Bayou La Loutre, near Hopedale, La., as deck hands prepare a fishing boat to set off with a load of oil restraining boom June 8. (NCR photos/Dennis Coday)

BRETON SOUND, LA. -- At the oil spill response staging center for St. Bernard Parish in eastern Louisiana, men and women scurry among stacks of absorbent boom that all hope will stop -- or at least slow -- the relentless creep of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico headed for the marshlands and bayous here.

Trucks and forklifts pull through checkpoints as Louisiana National Guard troops direct traffic. Boats that would otherwise be trawling for shrimp or crabbing line up to take on boom. A makeshift tent kitchen serves 900 meals three times a day to men and women dressed in National Guard khakis, Coast Guard blues and the florescent green-orange vests of BP contract workers.

Craig Taffaro, president of St. Bernard Parish (equivalent to a county), is ensconced in a temporary trailer on the edge of the staging area. He said June 8 that divine intervention had kept winds and tides favorable for his parish. Environmental impact here was ?mild to moderate,? he said. Some of the fishing fleet in his parish was still fishing. All that could change with the direction of the wind or one hurricane.

?That?s why it?s so important to get the oil stopped. If it doesn?t stop, our universe continues to be undefined,? Taffaro said.

?Undefined? sums up the situation nearly two months into Deepwater Horizon oil rig disaster.

The government released new figures June 15 showing that far more oil is flowing from the sea floor than believed, as much as 60,000 barrels (2.5 million gallons) of oil a day. BP claims it is capturing 50 percent of the flow, or 30,000 barrels of oil a day.

In his Oval Office address June 15, President Obama warned, ?The millions of gallons of oil that have spilled into the Gulf of Mexico are more like an epidemic, one that we will be fighting for months and even years.? The realization is settling in that this is actually a series of disasters -- environmental, economic, social and even cultural -- and that we are much closer to the beginning of it than the end.

Byron Encalade is president of the South Plaquemines United Fisheries Cooperative. He represents 75 African-American and Cambodian boat owners in one of the most threatened areas in Louisiana. He, like most of the cooperative members, is a fourth-generation fisherman and is an amalgamation of cultures: African-American, white, Spanish, French and Native American.

?We?re about family fisheries,? Encalade said. ?Those families have been on those bayous working in harmony with nature for hundreds of years. We have been taking what we need and leaving the rest for tomorrow, and that?s how we survived all these generations and generations.?

?The worst part of this, of course, is the uncertainties,? he said. ?This is the first time, I guess, we were ever faced with something that we just don?t know. We don?t know what tomorrow is going to bring.?

Louisianans know how to pick themselves up from a disaster. Their recent history includes Hurricanes Katrina (August 2005), Rita (September 2005), Gustav (August 2008) and Ike (September 2008). But this disaster is like nothing they have seen before.

Fr. John Arnone, pastor of St. Bernard Parish in St. Bernard, La., said the anxiety level has built up to an all-time high.

?With a hurricane, you know three, four, five days [in advance], it?s going to hit. It will do the damage and move on. With this, we?ve been waiting days now. We know it?s something big. It?s still out there. It?s coming our way. It?s going to do damage, but we don?t know how bad it?s going to be or what effects it?s going to have.?

Karen Turni Bazile, Taffaro?s assistant, says that the fishing industry is filled with proud, resilient people with generations of experience. ?Wives pitch in and children are deck hands,? she said. This experience, though, has been ?a shock to our psyche.? She said, ?We don?t know how this challenge will turn out. ... We will never know the full damage until it unfolds.?

By early May, New Orleans archdiocese Catholic Charities mental health services were in

the field. ?We are going to wherever people are meeting: community meetings, schools, churches, docks, wherever. BP meetings, BP claims offices,? said Marilyn Shraberg of Catholic Charities. ?We are handing out literature; we?re trying to do psycho-education groups. Whatever we can to try to keep ... our community as healthy as possible.?

Shraberg said they are hoping to forestall two alarming tends they saw after Hurricane Katrina: spikes in the suicide rate and in domestic violence.

Hurricane Katrina left Catholic Charities with a seasoned squad of trauma counselors who have been deployed among the fishermen. Shraberg said that many are ?from first responder teams -- meaning fireman, EMS workers, men who are used to working with men and their families.?

On June 15, the U.S. bishops? Catholic Campaign for Human Development pledged grants worth $300,000 to aid recovery work in the Gulf.

Encalade said that he has little time or mental space to think very far into the future. The needs of his cooperative members are immediate and pressing. He estimated that every member of the cooperative is in danger of losing his boat. That would have immediate impact on as many as 200 families when deck hands are counted.

He said their most immediate need ?is a claims process that works.? Encalade spoke with *NCR* June 8, the day after BP announced it would issue a second round of checks of up to $5,000 to businesses and individuals affected by the disaster. Fisherman, Catholic Charities personnel and local government officials have all found the claims process unwieldy and unsatisfactory.

?We don?t need to be going out here, filling out claim after claim,? Encalade said. ?We don?t need somebody acting like some type of analyst guru to sit down here and determine, ?Well, you made this much money but you didn?t lose this much money.? ...What we have asked for is a claim process that would stop all of this craziness.?

?We know by now what we have lost,? Encalade said. The fishing industry has lost its most productive time of the year. Each boat could be earning $2,000 to $3,000 a day in these summer months. Enough to live on the rest of the year.

?We?ve lost almost a year?s salary already. So why do [they] still have us going through this $5,000 [claim process]?? Encalade asked.

Encalade fears that the oil will kill a culture. ?When you destroy the family of fishermen, you will have a serious impact on the way we live. ... A lot of people say, ?Well, how come the food is so good in New Orleans?? I tell people we have some good cooks, but it?s not that we cook that much better than anybody else. It?s because we have fresh seafood.?

A patron can sit in a restaurant in the French Quarter at noon and eat crab and shrimp that was taken out of their natural habitat at 6:30 that same morning. ?You can?t get any fresher than that,? Encalade said. ?It?s that sweet, brackish water that gives [the seafood] its good flavor. That?s the secret of New Orleans cooking.?

And that is what is endangered.

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NCR reporting on the oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico

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