

Children deal with Gulf oil spill stress too

By JEFFREY COLLINS (AP)

GALLIANO, La. — Nine-year-old Zack Wilkerson spent a good chunk of his summer on the computer watching video of undersea robots try to fix the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

It wasn't his first choice, but the oil that spewed into the Gulf about 100 miles from his Galliano, La., home kept him from going fishing with his dad or to the beach with his family. As he prepares to start fifth grade on Friday, he wonders if some of his friends will be gone, their parents leaving the small towns on Bayou Lafourche because the fishing and tourism jobs are gone.



Mental health professionals are concerned about the toll this summer of uncertainty could be taking on kids like Zack and his friends.

Parents who have seen work slow down or stop are being forced to cut family budgets. Those lucky enough to find temporary work helping clean up the oil spill now face the prospect of those paychecks ending. And mothers and fathers who hoped to pass down traditions linked to the waters their grandfathers and great-grandfathers trolled wonder if that way of life has been spoiled forever by millions of gallons of crude.

"I keep hearing about it," Zack said of the oil spill and the daily updates he gets from his dad. "Sometimes I wonder if it will ever end."

A survey of 1,203 parents commissioned last month by the Children's Health Fund found a third of children along the most impacted area of the Gulf Coast in Louisiana and Mississippi have experienced physical or mental problems because of the spill set off by the April 20 explosion of an offshore drilling rig. Their parents reported they are having behavioral problems, acting depressed or nervous, and having trouble sleeping and getting along with other children.

About a quarter of households fear they might have to move to make ends meet, and the same number also reported a drop in income, according to the survey conducted for the New York-based fund by the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University.

The group first came to the Gulf nearly five years ago to see how Hurricane Katrina affected children. A study soon to be released found deep psychological problems persisting after the storm devastated the region. Then came the oil spill, adding more stress for many of those same children, said Dr. Irwin Redlener, president of the fund, which provides health care for low-income children.

"It's actually round two of psychological trauma for these communities, who also in the back of their minds are already worried about hurricanes this season," said Redlener, who plans to bring doctors to the Gulf in the next few weeks to provide physical and mental care for the children who are suffering nightmares or other stress, or who have rashes, breathing problems or other physical effects from the spill.

The survey's findings were no surprise to Zack's mom. While Pat Wilkerson has kept her job as a security guard at Port Fourchon, the gateway to the oil rigs in the Gulf, and her husband is a contractor for BP, they have both had friends who have lost jobs.

"You wait every day for the boom to drop, the ax to fall, and one of us to lose our jobs," Wilkerson said. "They have to know we're stressed."

Summers used to be filled with trips to the beach less than an hour away at Grand Isle, but the oil has kept the Wilkersons — and many others — from the sand and surf. The Children's Health Fund survey found nearly 85 percent of parents along the Gulf have stayed away from the water because of the spill.

The oil also has kept the Wilkersons from fishing, and that, too, has put a strain on their finances.

"That seafood would help stretch our food budget. But we don't have anything left in the freezer," said Wilkerson, as she waited with her son and 5-year-old daughter to pick up free school supplies being given out this week at Galliano Elementary School by Louisiana first lady Supriya Jindal.

Austin Verdin was waiting for supplies, too, and shyly smiled as Jindal handed him his backpack full of notebooks, folders and pencils. But he hasn't had a lot of other reasons to be happy about the summer between fourth and fifth grades.

Austin's dad, Michael, was working as a fisherman. When the waters closed because of the oil spill, he fell back on his commercial driver's license and took a job with a trucking firm, according to his wife, Elana Verdin.

He would much rather be on the water.

"We love the water. He was raised on it," Verdin said. "He loved going out there and spending time with his dad. You wonder if that kind of thing is gone now."

Fishing isn't the only industry where the future is uncertain. Michael Melancon, a senior biology teacher at South Lafourche High School, said the rig explosion that killed 11 workers and an offshore drilling moratorium that followed have some of his students rethinking career paths that might have otherwise led out to the giant oil rigs in the Gulf.

"They would ask, 'Is there going to be a job for me?' They are trying to figure out if they should stick around or go somewhere else," he said.

Melancon, whose district was cash-strapped even before the explosion, has his own worries about whether his job is secure. He was standing at the school supply giveaway in the Galliano school gym with his 8-year-old son and 10-year-old daughter, waiting in a long line that snaked around a basketball court with the finish peeling in numerous places. About two-thirds of the school's 430 students showed up.

Jindal, the mother of three young children herself, said she wanted to give them something to look forward to after a summer of worry.

"My children have all kinds of questions about the oil spill," Jindal said. "I can only imagine what these parents are having to explain."

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