



Oil leak worries linger For many in Gulf, disaster not over

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The Deepwater Horizon well may no longer be spewing oil into the Gulf of Mexico, but that doesn't mean the disaster is over for many people.

Worry, anxiety, uncertainty and more linger as the oil gets removed from beaches and marshes or is skimmed off the water.

"People are falling all over each other to declare this disaster over," said Dr. Irwin Redlener, co-founder and president of the Children's Health Fund. It's important to be very clear how we define natural disasters and when we declare them over, he said.

"The anxieties remain," Redlener said. However, to the extent that the public thinks the disaster is over, that's how much attention will be turned away from the needs of people still affected by the aftermath, he said.

And, Redlener added, with attention going elsewhere, so do the resources to address remaining issues.

Redlener and others at the National Center for Disaster Preparedness and the Children's Health Fund held town hall meetings in coastal areas impacted by the April 20 rig explosion that killed 11 workers and followed up with a telephone survey in Louisiana and Mississippi.

Among the findings of the research were that one in five households had seen their income decrease as a result of the oil leak, 8 percent had lost jobs and coastal residents who earned less than \$25,000 a year were more likely to report lost income and more likely to report impacts on their children's mental and physical health.

"I was very much taken aback by the substantial anxiety expressed by people from all ages," Redlener said.

The survey began a few days after the first capping of the well, which ended up being the stop for oil going into the Gulf of Mexico, he said.

"So it wasn't while it was actively gushing," Redlener said. However, the survey results did seem to correlate with what was reported at town hall meetings the group had held in the coastal parishes before the survey was conducted, he said.

"The survey underscored and verified the impression we got at our site visit a few weeks before," Redlener said.

Another concern is that many of the counties and parishes impacted by the oil leak were underserved even before it, Redlener said. Getting medical care for mental or physical problems now becomes even more of a challenge, he said.

Also, Gulf Coast residents experienced hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, followed by a prolonged recovery and now the Deepwater Horizon oil leak, he said.

“So what we have is a population that is really at its boiling point for anxiety,” Redlener said, adding that having multiple traumatic experiences is unusual.

LSU sociology professors Mathew Lee and Troy Blanchard did a study earlier during the Deepwater Horizon oil leak and also found elevated levels of stress and anxiety among coastal residents.

The survey started June 17 and 933 people in sample ZIP codes in various places in southeast and central coastal Louisiana were interviewed. What the researchers found is that at that time, self-reported worry and stress was more than double what people were experiencing a year ago, according to the July report.

“This is two months into it (the oil leak) so all they’re seeing day after day is oil spilling into the water,” Lee said. It’s hard to say how long that elevated stress level lasted or if it’s still going on for some people, he said.

“It may be that their level of concern is dropping dramatically,” Lee said. But there is a lot of research out there that points to long-term consequences of this kind of event lingering, he said.

“There are enduring mental health effects,” Lee said. “I would very much like to do a follow-up on it; the problem is finding someone to fund it.”

On Aug. 16, BP announced \$52 million in funding to help pay for mental health services for Gulf Coast residents in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida.