



The Gulf oil spill's cost comes into focus

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By [Rick Jervis](#), USA TODAY



NEW ORLEANS — Long after the cleanup crews and BP paychecks are gone, Gulf Coast fishermen will be dealing with dead oysters and a perception problem.

Salt marshes will struggle to regrow grasses raked by oil and digest stray pools of crude. Business owners will work to revive shuttered businesses and bruised economies in the wake of the [Gulf of Mexico](#) spill.

BP on Wednesday took a major step toward permanently capping the blown-out well and ending the 107-day disaster.

Drilling mud forced down the well was pushing oil back into a reservoir 2.5 miles underwater for the first time since the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded April 20, killing 11 workers and unleashing the largest oil spill in U.S. history.

For many, Wednesday's news marked the beginning of the end of an ecological nightmare that saw more than 50 million gallons of crude escape into the Gulf — nearly five times the 11 million gallons that spilled from the Exxon Valdez tanker in [Alaska](#) in 1989, previously the nation's worst oil disaster.

In the Gulf, the footprint the spill leaves on the regional economy, the environment, political futures and the mental health of those closest to the disaster is likely to be felt for years to come.

A survey of 1,200 coastal residents by the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health found that more than one-third of children showed physical or mental effects of the spill, such as respiratory problems and depression, and nearly one-fourth of residents felt a need to relocate.

"There are a great deal of issues that are just beginning to get uncovered," says Irwin Redlener, the center's director and co-author of the survey.

BP is still working to clog the well for good. It may not be cemented and killed for a few more weeks. Increasingly, though, the broken wellhead appears to be lassoed under control.

Stopping oil from gushing into the Gulf had been the singular goal of BP engineers, Coast Guard officials and the thousands of fishers who were abruptly kept from their harvests this year. Now, there are lingering questions: How much longer will the fishers working on the cleanup be paid by BP? What effect will the nearly 2 million gallons of chemical dispersants sprayed on the spill have on fisheries? How will local tourism rebound?

"What we don't know and what we don't see are probably going to be the most determining factors for how soon we recover," says Rep. [Charlie Melancon](#), a Louisiana Democrat who represents many of the affected areas.