



Written by [Rebecca Terrell](#) on May 11, 2012

Mutants No Danger to Gulf Shrimping

Reports of mutant shrimp spawned recent news stories linking Gulf of Mexico shrimping closures to the British Petroleum oil leak of 2010. It turns out the closures are regularly scheduled seasonal occurrences that allow small shrimp to grow to a marketable size.



The ABC affiliate in Pensacola, Mobile, and Fort Walton Beach published an April 21 post on its [website](#) entitled “Looming Crisis: Officials Close Gulf Waters to Shrimping as Reports of Deformed Seafood Intensify.” The now-deleted story is replaced by a simple retraction announcing a temporary closure by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) due to shrimp size. “And we’d like to clarify that the closures were not due to lesions being found on shrimp as we reported earlier this weekend and Monday morning,” notes the site.

Indeed, ADCNR’s marine resources director, Chris Blankenship, confirms otherwise. According to the local [NBC affiliate](#), Blankenship announced the state will likely open its shrimping season early this year due to unseasonably warm weather but denied any link between the size of shrimp and the BP leak.

Likewise, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) is set to close shrimping in that state on May 15. “The closure is designed to allow these small shrimp to grow to a larger more valuable size before they are vulnerable to harvest,” said Robin Riechers, [TPWD](#) coastal fisheries division director. According to the Texas [Victoria Advocate](#) TPWD biologist Norman Boyd predicts a good year for shrimping based on preliminary studies. And [Bloomberg](#) reports Louisiana shrimping is set to open May 21 when shrimp catches are projected to measure 100 count per pound or less. (The larger the shrimp, the fewer shrimp per pound.)

Yet media reports still point a finger of blame at BP. Writing about the doomsday retraction, New Orleans attorney Stuart Smith warned on his [blog](#), “However, let me be very clear, the confusion over the water closures in no way changes the fact that there are severely deformed shrimp, crabs and fish coming out of the Gulf of Mexico.” He references an AP story in Texas’ [Beaumont Enterprise](#) detailing accounts of sick marine life near the leak site. It provides evidence of contamination there but acknowledges the relatively small percentage of fish affected by what scientists refuse to definitively attribute to the 2010 incident.

Writing for [The Picayune Item](#) in Mississippi, David Farrell reports the problem with seafood isn’t safety but supply. He quotes George Lods, an area seafood wholesaler, who gets most of his product from the



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Gulf of Mexico. "Because of the BP oil spill, Gulf Coast seafood is probably the most tested seafood in the world, and yes, it is safe, no question," said Lods.

Farrell interviewed several other local business owners who agree dwindling supplies are driving costs up, partly due to government interference. Lods points out oyster reefs were closed for months after the leak, and now oyster prices are double. New EPA refrigeration requirements for boats have driven up costs for fishermen as well. But more is involved than seafood. Even the price of farm-raised freshwater catfish has tripled since the leak, hardly attributable to BP.

Lods is optimistic about this year's catch. "The supply should get more plentiful and prices should start to fall," he predicts. "I think this year will be a decent season."

Others are not as hopeful. Seafood business owner Dean Blanchard is distressed by scanty catches full of shrimp with lesions and tumors, "stuff that I've never seen in my life," reported [The Daily Comet](#) in Lafourche Parish, Louisiana. He blames the 2010 leak and chemical dispersants used to dissolve the oil.

It is true that dispersants injected into the leaking oil in 2010 prevented it from surfacing and instead formed a toxic sludge on the Gulf floor. As shrimp are bottom-feeders, they could easily be affected. Back at the time of the leak [The New American](#) interviewed Dr. Walter Starck, a marine biologist who specializes in coral reefs and fisheries. He explained such dispersants were "far more damaging to marine life" than crude alone. "Their only real purpose is cosmetic and PR at the expense of the environment," Starck asserted.

"It is impossible to tell whether there has been a significant increase in the natural rate of deformations from a few anecdotal accounts," Starck says in response to current reports of sick shrimp. "If such an increase is real and related to the oil spill it would seem most likely to be related to the massive use of chemical dispersants rather than to the oil itself. Deformities do not seem to have been associated with numerous previous spills, but the use of dispersants in this one was far greater than ever before."



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