

Gulf Oil Disaster Gushes on Unabated

Wildlife in the Gulf region will be affected for years to come.

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This is a satellite view of the British Petroleum oil disaster (inside of the white box) as it appeared on April 29. This MODIS image is provided by NASA's Terra satellite, downlinked and processed at the University of Miami's CSTARS ground station.

This photo was taken April 29, nine days after the Deepwater Horizon oil platform explosion that killed 11, by NASA's Terra satellite. You can see the British Petroleum rupture just off the Louisiana coast as the dull gray interlocking comma shapes. The sun reflecting off the water enhances the oil's visibility and allows it to be seen clearly on satellite photos.

Scientists at the Center for Southeastern Tropical Advanced Remote Sensing (CSTARS) at the University of Miami's Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science are working with several international satellite data providers to get satellite images of the Gulf of Mexico. The picture was taken with MODIS, an instrument onboard the Terra NASA satellite (there is another one on the Aqua satellite). Data from the MODIS is used by for monitoring oceanic and atmospheric health (such as sea surface temperature and tracking red tide). You can watch the spill's progress at www.cstars.miami.edu, where images of The Gulf are updated daily.

Two days after the oil platform exploded, it sank, breaking a pipe connected to a well on the sea floor. Since then oil has gushed from the pipe at about 5,000 feet below the ocean's surface. By April 29, the oil had already spread dangerously close to shore. Because of the rupture's depth, efforts to stop it have not yet been successful. Controlled burns of oil at the surface, domes over the rupture and remote-controlled vehicles that manipulate equipment on the sea floor have all failed.

The effects of this rupture on sea turtles, birds, marine mammals, fish and shellfish and people will be felt for years to come. Within just several weeks, the disaster area has grown to the size of a small state and turned into an epic environmental disaster that threatens the \$2.4-billion-dollar shrimp fishing industry, as well as wetlands and beaches in four states. It's been 21 years since the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska, and the wildlife there is still recovering from it. The Gulf area hasn't completely recovered from Hurricane Katrina, and the thousands of barrels of oil released every day by this latest disaster damages the area even more.

While some animals can leave the area, fish eggs and larvae are immobile and can't escape. Unfortunately, the rupture has come at the worst time: spawning season, which means that the next generation of fish and shellfish in the area are at risk. Estuaries and mangroves are expected to suffer from the rupture, which will affect crustacean breeding (consequently hurting the region's fishing industry).

Crustaceans aren't the only ones in danger. Because they consume the contaminants from the spill, their predators, such as fish, crustaceans and even humans, will also be adversely affected should they consume shrimp and other crustaceans fouled by the rupture. Because of this health concern, federal authorities have temporarily banned commercial and recreational fishing in the areas most affected by the disaster.