

Worst-Case Oil Scenario Yet to Unfold

June 14, 2010 11:00 AM Ryan Rivet
rivet@tulane.edu

Following the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion in April that has created the largest oil spill in U.S. history, scientists and pundits have speculated on the “worst-case scenario” for the Louisiana wetlands and the Gulf Coast in general. As bad as the current situation appears, it could get worse, according to one Tulane professor.



Contractors haul in oil containment boom in Bay Bourbeux, La., to reposition it. Crews work 12-hour days maintaining, repositioning and deploying boom to prevent the spread of oil into marsh grass in Terrebonne Parish. (Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class John D. Miller)

“As the pendulum swings, we're still going toward the worst-case scenario, but it's difficult to say if we're going to get there,” says [Michael Blum](#), assistant professor of ecology and evolutionary biology. “The large body of oil is still offshore, and the weather has been favorable thus far.”

Calling it a kind of a “stay of execution” for coastal ecosystems, Blum says the potential for oil to wash ashore has grown from the initial concern for a few hundred miles of Louisiana wetlands to that of thousands of miles of coastline stretching all the way to the Atlantic coast of Florida.

“This is a national event,” Blum says. “Because Louisiana and the Mississippi River Delta are so productive and so essential as nursery habitats for these commercial fisheries, you have the potential for impacts that transcend state and regional perspectives.”

As bad as that may sound, Blum says the real worst-case scenario looms in the Atlantic storm season, one that is predicted to be more active than usual. If a storm enters the Gulf, it could push the oil further inland, causing ecological havoc that at best may take decades to reverse. He says that there has to be a contingency plan in place for that possibility.

“It’s part of our culture to have hurricane-preparedness plans,” Blum says. “The expectation should be put out there that BP and the federal government should have similar hurricane-preparedness plans in terms of how they will respond to the movement of oil in the event of a storm.”