

Asheville area people help with Gulf Coast oil spill cleanup

By Nanci Bompey
Asheville Citizen-Times
June 23, 2010

Mark Cantrell is heading home today after spending weeks on a boat rescuing oil-covered birds in the marshes of southeast Louisiana.

Cantrell is a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Asheville. He plans to return to the Gulf Coast as many times as he's needed.

"The work is absolutely necessary," he said. "It is a tremendous and devastating impact to the shoreline, and it promises to get even worse."

The gulf might seem like a world away from Western North Carolina, but residents are responding to the spill. And some are among the victims of the spill's hit to the local economy, which had just started to rebound after one of the nation's most devastating hurricanes.

"It's upsetting," said real estate agent Joe Salloum, who lives in Gulfport, Miss., and has a townhouse in Biltmore Lake. "Before Katrina, the whole coast was booming."

Mickey Ladner, a retired Mississippi highway patrol officer who lives half the year outside Bryson City, said the entire impact has yet to be seen.

"We're still recovering from Katrina, and now this is going to really hurt. We have not even seen the beginning of it," said he said.

The Bay St. Louis, Miss., native who now lives just down the road in Long Beach said he loves the water, birds and sea life of the Mississippi coast as much as the flowers and mountains of Western North Carolina. "It makes you so sad that you can't believe it," he said. "I can't tell you how much it hurts your heart."

The oil hasn't hit the Mississippi coast yet, but Rob Young is keeping an eye on where the spill is headed.

Young, director of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University, is in the panhandle of Florida this week performing flyovers of the oil spill. The goal is to keep an eye on the spread of the oil and evaluate which responses to the spill have been the most effective.

Young and his crew have been gathering data since the spill started, but it is still too early to tell which responses have worked and which haven't. On Monday, Young said the worst he saw was off the coast of Alabama and that the coast could be dealing with the effects of the oil spill for years.

“This is the kind of science I'd rather not learn about,” said Young, who typically studies hurricanes and erosion, which are often destructive but naturally occurring. “There really are silver linings in disasters like hurricanes, but there's no silver lining in this.”

Forest Kibler who lives in the Fort Morgan area of Gulf Shores, Ala., and is building a house in Maggie Valley, saw and smelled oil last week while walking the beaches in the national refuge area near his house on the Gulf Coast.

“We have seen what happened in the marshes in Louisiana,” said Kibler, who loves to fish, shrimp and crab at the waters near his home. “We have that imprinted in our minds.”

The downturn in construction has also hurt Bay St. Louis resident Casey Williams, who owns a home furnishings store. Williams said he and his wife may move to Asheville, where they won't have to deal with the hurricanes and, now, the oil.

“If the economy doesn't pick up, we're thinking about moving,” he said. But, “with everyone scared about oil we couldn't get the money out of our house that we put into it.”