

# Los Angeles Times

## Mobile, Ala., feels backlash of gulf oil spill

Locals are wary of outsiders' mounting scorn against the offshore oil and gas industry, the city's top employer.



Natural gas rigs appear off the coast of Dauphin Island, Alabama. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times / May 4, 2010)

By Julie Cart, Los Angeles Times

May 4, 2010 4:28 p.m.

Print Size



Reporting from Mobile, Ala.

The massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is not likely to change pro-oil attitudes in southern Alabama — where gas rigs sprout in the middle of Mobile Bay, drilling platforms are visible from the beaches and the energy industry is a top employer.

Residents are comfortable living side by side with refineries, pump-jacks and the acrid smell of sulfur, a byproduct of natural gas production. And in an effort to capitalize on the opening of the eastern gulf to new deepwater exploration — a federal initiative put on hold in the wake of the BP disaster — local businesses had even launched an "Offshore Alabama" campaign.

Now many are gritting their teeth at the twin catastrophes: the possible damage to their beloved coastal systems and wildlife, and the mounting scorn targeted at the offshore oil and gas industry, which pumps \$500 million a year of taxes and royalties into state trusts for education and other programs.

[Receive breaking news alerts on your mobile device. Register »](#)

Locals who depend on the industry for their livelihood are feeling put-upon.

Steve Wellington, who captains a boat ferrying oil crews offshore, said he was leery of outsiders judging an industry that employs his family and neighbors. "I hope people who aren't from around here don't jump on the offshore business too much," he said. "It was an accident."

Steve Russell of the Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce echoed the general public opinion on an industry that produces more than \$2.5 billion worth of oil and gas annually: "We totally support the oil and gas industry, and we are committed to the industry."

More so than the fishing industry in neighboring states, jobs and support services here are tied to the oil business — construction, boat yards and pipefitters.

All were excited about the prospect of more offshore drilling, which local officials had projected would generate more than \$20 million a year for the state and add more jobs. The Offshore Alabama effort was created to brand Mobile as a launching point for exploration in the gulf, Russell said.

Travis Short is the owner of Horizon Shipbuilding, which is based in Bayou La Batre, Ala., and manufactures and repairs boats that ferry crews and supplies to the offshore rigs.

Short calls himself an optimist but said the news of the disaster was wearing on those in the energy business.

"I've watched the news every day since the spill, and I see so much negative news," he said. "I work side by side with these folks, and I understand what they are upset about."

Their greatest fear is that offshore oil and gas production will be temporarily halted and hurt the local economy.

Mobile-based Hargrove Engineers and Constructors relies on the energy industry for 30% of its income.

"We need this energy, we all know that," said Dennis Watson, a vice president at Hargrove, "and it has to come from somewhere."

David Underhill, a leader of the local chapter of the Sierra Club, represents the few minority voices in town. He said community dissent was all but snuffed out by oil and gas industry interests.

"As far as being important because it employs people, how much employment does the industry provide if the oil wrecks the marine life, our fisheries, our fishing industry and our recreation?" Underhill asked.

[julie.cart@latimes.com](mailto:julie.cart@latimes.com)

Copyright © 2010, [The Los Angeles Times](#)