

COLUMN: PRESIDENT'S HOOK

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Addressing the Oil Spill in the Gulf of Mexico

The magnitude and impacts of the British Petroleum *Deepwater Horizon* tragedy in the northern Gulf of Mexico are virtually incomprehensible. The loss of life; the specter of oil drifting across the Gulf, washing onto beaches and barrier islands, and into bays, marshes, and estuaries; the resulting changes to ecological diversity and functions; and the associated social, cultural and economic impacts are horrific. Commercial, recreational, artisanal, and subsistence fisheries are already closed, or are likely to be closed, in vast areas of the Gulf, and potentially beyond the Gulf.

Throughout the region, communities that were just recovering from the impacts of major hurricanes now face a menace that threatens core elements of life and livelihoods. Gulf Coast states are in a state of shock and that shock is rippling across a nation and into the rest of the world. It is a tragedy that transcends disaster. This is a catastrophe.

OK, now what? Well, as AFS president, here's my guidance. First of all, let's remember the Deep South's definition of "class": grace under pressure. This is not a time to wilt, weep, and slink back into shadows full of grief for treasures lost. This is not a time for anger, vindictiveness, or profiteering. This is not a time to engage in comfortable isolationism. It is, rather, a time to gather our collective forces, engage cool minds, generate clear thoughts, and envision a new reality...a new future...to make decisions on how to address that future and then get to work. We may shake our heads

when we see images of individuals wiping oil off of a blade of marsh grass, scooping oil and tar balls off of a mud flat or sandy beach, or washing a bird. Down here we say, "That's like cutting a man's leg off with a chainsaw and then handing him a band-aid." But the reality is that people throughout the region, and many from beyond, are on the Gulf Coast working hard to address the spill, doing what they can with the resources that they have—even if all they have is an absorbent towel, a shovel, a bottle of drinking water, and the internal drive to keep slogging ahead.

The American Fisheries Society is absolutely engaged with the issue. As a professional scientific society our job is to make sure that there is timely exchange of science-based information. That's what we do. That's who we are. That's our identity. That's how we address issues. That's how we best support professionals in our ranks and beyond.

We have opened and are maintaining communication with colleagues in leadership positions who are working with the oil spill at the highest levels of government. We are offering our services to assist with scientific review of proposals and other documents, and identification of and linkages with AFS members and others who have the expertise and experience necessary to address the myriad issues that are and will be associated with the oil spill. As the issues become more comprehensively framed, there will likely be legislative action. As legislative action evolves, AFS will

engage the process via congressional briefings, ensuring that science, as related to fisheries, is firmly positioned within that framework.

It is my intention that you be fully informed about issues regarding the oil spill. Accordingly, Jane Lubchenco, U.S. Undersecretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere and administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), will be one of the speakers during the Plenary Session of the AFS Annual Meeting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (Monday morning, 13 September 2010). I am arranging a briefing on the oil spill that will be presented during the AFS annual business meeting (Tuesday afternoon, 14 September 2010). I have also asked the AFS Annual Meeting program chair (Pat Mazik) to open a special session to address the spill (Thursday afternoon, 16 September 2010). I am in charge of that session. We have developed and are maintaining a special link on the AFS website, in partnership with sister organizations in the Coalition of Natural Resource Societies (CNRS), so that you can be connected with the latest information on the oil spill.

This is a time of great testing, a time for action, and a time for professionalism of the highest order. It is a time for AFS to come forward to serve where needed with its leadership as the oldest and largest science-based fisheries organization in North America. We have done this before. We will do it again this time...with dignity and good order.