

Seafood price spike likely after Gulf oil spill

Spill could leave mark on Massachusetts restaurant menus

By Steve Adams

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The Gulf oil spill could leave its mark on restaurant menus this summer as rising demand for shrimp, crab and oysters drives up prices.

One seafood distributor is expecting widespread ripples from the BP leak, including shortages and higher prices this summer.

“We’re looking at this as being a long-term disaster,” said Charlie Nagle, president of **John Nagle Co.** in South Boston.

Restaurants and fish markets in Louisiana are likely to switch from local suppliers to those in the mid-Atlantic states, which would pit them against New England buyers of fish and shellfish, Nagle said.

“If they can’t get local fish, they’re going to have to bring it in, and that will put us in competition with them,” Nagle said. “It will cause prices of crabs and oysters to go up here.”

Richard Stavis, president and CEO of South Boston importer **Stavis Seafoods**, expects the oyster market to be affected the most. The Gulf region accounts for two-thirds of all U.S. oyster production.

“There could be a shortage. It could get significantly more expensive and it could knock it off menus,” Stavis said.

The Gulf crisis is already driving up prices in the shrimp industry, which has been disrupted by an April U.S. embargo on the import of Mexican wild shrimp because of environmental concerns. The embargo comes at the same time as a shift toward smaller-sized shrimp at Asian shrimp farms.

“We’re seeing a real shortage in those (jumbo) sizes,” Stavis said. “As we saw this past week in the supermarket when you couldn’t find a bottle of water, we’ve found people have been jockeying and bidding up the price around 12 percent.”

Grocery shoppers won’t notice any changes for at least a month, the time it takes retail seafood prices to reflect commodities markets, Stavis said.

Richard Burke, owner of **Burke's Seafood in Quincy**, said he expects the price of Gulf shrimp to rise. The seafood market buys the bulk of its shrimp from the Gulf region.

“We’re all kind of holding our breath and hoping for the best, but bracing for the worst,” Burke said.

The spill could stir up more business for New England fisheries. Shortages of oysters and crabs could generate more orders for New England scallops, said Les Kaufman, a professor of biology at Boston University.

Skip Bennett, owner of **Island Creek Oysters**, said he expects a shortage this summer. His company, which harvests oysters from 10 beds in Duxbury, doesn’t have the capacity to take on additional orders.

Whatever the effects on New England, they will pale in comparison to those in Louisiana, Nagle said.

“The real disaster is for the people down there,” he said. “We’ll have to live with some shortages, but people making a livelihood on the water, they’re going to be in tough shape for a while.”

Steve Adams may be reached at sadams@ledger.com.

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