

Oil Spill Likely to Affect Vermont Seafood Prices

BY JOEL BANNER BAIRD, FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • TUESDAY, MAY 4, 2010

An expected downturn in Gulf of Mexico oyster and shrimp harvests due to a catastrophic oil spill will boost prices on those delicacies, experts predict — even if the seafood originates in New England waters.

“Oyster prices are already bumping up,” Richard Stavis, president and CEO of Boston-based Stavis Seafoods, said Monday. The company supplies **sell**ers in Chittenden County.

Since Thursday, Stavis said, domestic processors increased the price of large “cocktail-sized” shrimp — a Gulf specialty — by 50 cents a pound.

Stavis attributes increases in the supply line prices to spill-related speculation as well as other, unrelated issues (Mexico’s delivery of some shrimp to the U.S., for instance, has been suspended temporarily due to violations of fishing regulations).

Roughly 2.6 million or more gallons of oil have spilled into the Gulf since an April 20 blast sunk a BP-owned deep-water oil rig and killed 11 workers.

A buffer in supply will protect Vermont and most of New England from short-term spikes, Stavis said. Supplies of shrimp, much of it in frozen inventory, are good, and Gulf oyster beds have been productive.

Janice Clark, manager for Ray’s Seafood in Essex Junction (a Stavis customer), said business is on an even keel; the industry is between shrimp seasons, and demand is high for fresh Alaskan halibut.

“It will take a while for Gulf prices to catch up with us,” she said.

Not if, but when

Jurij Homziak, a marine ecology researcher at the University of Vermont, said the oil slick produced by the Deepwater Horizon mishap is “unstoppable” in its collision course with the coast.

“It’s going to be impossible for us to protect every inlet, every mangrove swamp and sea-grass bed,” he said. “It’s just a matter of time.”

The interruption in seafood to restaurants and grocery stores will be dwarfed by multiple breaks in the region’s food chain, from microscopic plankton to finned fish, he said.

At the Shanty seafood restaurant on Battery Street in Burlington, owner Al Gobeille still displays mounds of Massachusetts-farmed Island Creek oysters and jumbo-sized Gulf shrimp. He estimates the cost of the oysters will rise in about two weeks if supply-starved southern distributors start bidding on Atlantic oyster harvests.

And shrimp?

Gobeille placed an advance order for 10,000 pounds in November. Half of that is in a warehouse, frozen. The fate of the remainder is anyone's guess. Shrimp harvests hang on the behavior of the 6,800-square-mile oil slick lurking off the Gulf Coast.

"It's scary," he said, "but it's nothing compared to what's going on with the fishermen and the processors down there. Menus here, we can quickly change. We'll take oysters off the specials, for instance. But I'd gladly pay more for shrimp if we could just plug that well."

Multiple problems

Sunday, the National Marine Fisheries Service placed a 10-day ban on fishing in a wide swath of Gulf waters.

Steve Wilson, the service's Maryland-based chief quality officer for seafood inspection, said the scope of damage to commercial fisheries was "almost impossible to tell" until the slick reached shallow, more species-intensive coastlines.

Oysters and slow-moving crustaceans will be especially vulnerable.

But, Wilson said, even if an organism survives the ingestion of aromatic hydrocarbons in the oil — even if (like the larger finned fish) its brief encounter with the slick renders it safe to eat — the oil might impart a commercially unacceptable odor or flavor.

Ethan Wood, owner of Wood Mountain Fish in Boston and a purveyor of mostly Atlantic-sourced seafood to City Market in Burlington and **Healthy Living** in South Burlington, said local tastes tend toward mollusks and fish caught in colder, northern waters.

But Wood included himself among hundreds of industry workers "at the edge of their seats" as the oil slick spreads — because it brings added unpredictability to an already shaky market.

Stavis listed a few recent swings: Last month's volcanic eruption in Iceland (and its disruption to air traffic), for instance, grounded a large portion of exports of New England lobster and Norwegian salmon, and sent prices soaring; a viral infection in Chilean farmed salmon has nearly doubled wholesale prices for Northern Hemisphere varieties.

Wood added another this week: The burst water main in Boston has fish distributors scrambling for ice.

<http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/article/20100504/NEWS02/100503019/Oil-spill-likely-to-affect-Vermont-seafood-prices>

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