

Gulf Seafood is Safe to Eat After Oil Spill

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By: Michael R. Taylor, J.D.

This week, the Fish and Wildlife Service will begin a series of public meetings on the draft plan for the restoration of damage to natural resources resulting from the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill. It is natural that the discussion of this plan would also raise the question of whether Gulf seafood is safe to eat. The answer to that question is, yes. Gulf seafood is as safe to eat now as it was before the spill.

When the Deepwater Horizon spill occurred, there was a great deal of concern over the safety of the region's seafood. Fishing areas were shut down and an extensive sampling program was introduced to ensure the seafood was safe to eat before the fishing areas were re-opened.



When we developed the sampling program, we had to determine which components of the oil were harmful so we could test for their levels in the seafood. Following internationally recognized standards, we tested for Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons (PAHs). They stay in seafood the longest amount of time, and once they are at a safe level any other oil hydrocarbons will be proportionately low, as well.

The FDA, NOAA, EPA, and the Gulf States, discussed and agreed on a level of PAHs that would raise a health concern. If the seafood we tested was below the level of concern, it would be safe to eat. Over 10,000 seafood specimens were tested. In most cases, no PAHs were found, and, when they were, the PAH levels in the seafood were 100 to 1,000 times below the levels which would raise a health concern. The best way to understand how safe Gulf seafood is, is to visualize how much seafood you could eat and still not reach the levels of concern.

Given the low levels of PAHs we found, when we found them at all, someone could eat 63 lbs of peeled shrimp (that's 1,575 jumbo shrimp); or 5 lbs. of oyster meat (that's 130 individual oysters); or 9 lbs. of fish (that's 18 8-ounce fish filets) every day for five years

and still not reach the levels of concern. We feel confident that the levels that were set are safe and protect the health of anyone who eats seafood, including children and pregnant women.

It is also important to understand the process we used to sample the seafood. A seafood sample might actually go through multiple chemical tests. The first test was a screening test, and, if the results came within 50% of the levels of concern, a second test was performed that more accurately measured the levels, allowing us to be certain about the safety of the seafood.

This process of double testing is not unlike the screening we go through when entering a court house, for example. We often pass through a metal detector that screens us for metal objects. If the detector goes off, the security guard typically will use a metal detecting wand to find the metal object and determine if it can be brought into the building. The seafood screening test would identify something that deserved a second look, and the second, more accurate seafood test would determine just what the PAH level was. When PAHs were found as a result of the second test they were 100 to 1,000 times below the levels of concern.

A great deal of effort was invested after the [Gulf spill](#) so that we could provide an answer to one question: Is Gulf seafood safe to eat? Yes, Gulf seafood is safe to eat, and it is safe to eat for everyone.

Michael Taylor is Deputy Commissioner for Foods at FDA

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