

A Year After Oil Spill, Pensacola Beach In Recovery

Melissa Nelson, Associated Press

PENSACOLA BEACH, Fla. (AP) — Pensacola Beach's famously white sands — coated in thick crude last year after the nation's worst offshore oil spill — are back to their original color, and tourist arrivals outnumber what they were before BP PLC's blown-out well spewed 172 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.

Hotels and restaurants that sat largely abandoned at the height of the spill are reporting a 50 percent increase this spring compared to the same time last year before the disaster.

"We've had visitors from 48 states this spring. They know our beaches are clean and they aren't asking about the oil," said W.A. "Buck" Lee, executive director of the Santa Rosa Island Authority, which oversees Pensacola Beach.

Yet reminders of the spill are everywhere — in TV ads from attorneys seeking to represent spill victims, in pamphlets for the mental health distress hotline distributed at the Island Authority's office, in the early morning beach walks by BP crews that scour the sand each day and remove tar balls that washed ashore.

Lee, who has overseen the beach's cleanup since the spill started, said he wants to make sure BP cleaning crews stay on scene in case storms moving through the Gulf push undersea oil or tar mats onto the beach.

"It's not over," Lee said.

But the lifelong beach resident said the situation looks much better than he thought it would last June.

"We were covered in oil 50 feet up all along the shoreline. Then the oil was covered up by three high tides and buried before we could start cleaning it. I felt depressed and exasperated because I was staying so busy fighting with BP and the politicians. I knew what had to be done, but I wasn't sure how we would get it done," Lee said.

Lee pushed for heavy sand-cleaning machinery and for permission to dig 3 feet down to ensure all the buried oil was thoroughly removed before the 2011 tourism season. It seems to have worked.

Ed Schroeder, director of the Pensacola Bay Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, said hotel tax revenues for the region are up 15 percent this year.

"We did some really effective marketing campaigns and we were really able to move the needle on tourism. We did everything we could to ... show the day-by-day

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truth of the beaches and the cleanup and the vacation experience," he said.

Tourist Charleene Wilson headed out to the white sand with her beach chair and towel last week for her first day of vacation. She didn't know she was visiting Pensacola Beach on the anniversary of the massive spill.

"I am expecting it to be just as beautiful as I want it to be. They have been talking on the news about it being cleaned of all the oil."

The Grand Marlin restaurant on Pensacola Beach opened weeks before the spill and struggled to make it through the summer.

"Because we are a seafood restaurant and because of the lost tourism, we did not get close to what our budgeted numbers were," said Lisa Jacobi, the banquet coordinator.

But the business is doing much better this spring.

On the menu one recent day: Local crab claws and fresh Florida oysters from nearby waters.

The beach is largely the same as it was before the spill, Jacobi said.

"People think the oil spill is behind us. You cannot really see oil unless you go out on the beach and dig and look for it. Tourism is up and I think business is good except for maybe a couple of businesses that didn't make through the spill," she said.

At the nearby Island Style beach department store, owner Jeff Elbert says business was up 30 percent compared to last year.

"I find it remarkable that my customers that are coming in make no reference to the oil. Thank goodness they were able to come and clean up the oil, and they were meticulous about it. Things are back to normal, and that is a welcome relief," he said.

Although Elbert is continuing to fight for compensation from the Gulf Coast Claims Facility for business losses from last summer, he is optimistic about the future.

When oil coated the beach last June, Elbert said, he felt hopeless and didn't know if the beach could be returned to its former state.

"I know there is a huge sense of relief island-wide now that businesses are starting to recover and that it is going to be a good season for all of us," he said.

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