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Fishing advisory issued for Escambia, Santa Rosa Okaloosa and Walton counties

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) advises anglers and boaters in Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa and Walton counties in northwest Florida that oil from the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill could soon reach coastal waters of these counties. Oil spill trajectory projections conducted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) indicate that these areas could experience some amount of oiling in the next 72 hours, but these projections carry a certain degree of uncertainty.

In addition to the NOAA projections, the FWC is conducting airborne and waterborne surveillance to definitively establish oil presence and extent to guide management actions. In the interim, FWC cautions people to avoid any oil they might encounter on the water while fishing or boating.

The FWC, along with partnering agencies and fishery stakeholders, is keeping a close watch on coastal waters in northwest Florida and is prepared to prohibit the harvest of fish if oil has contaminated the water to the point where it is not safe to consume fish. The FWC will decide whether to close a specific area to the harvest of fish based on a visual assessment that confirms there is a significant amount of oil on the surface of the water.

If a closure is necessary, it will be as small as possible and would prohibit all commercial and recreational harvest and possession of fish within clear and describable boundaries. Catch-and-release fishing would still be allowed in a closed harvest area. Closed harvesting areas will reopen as soon as possible but only after an official determination is made that the consumption of fish from those waters is safe. Any consideration of shellfish closures would be coordinated closely with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

It is also important to note that oil has not affected most of Florida and there are still vast areas open to fishing and other recreational opportunities. The FWC encourages everyone to go fishing where the waters are clear and to enjoy freshly harvested Florida seafood products.

Updated information regarding fishing advisories or harvest closures in Florida due to the BP oil spill will be posted online at <http://myfwc.com/OilSpill/index.htm>.