

OIL SPILL CLAIMS

Checks coming for fishermen; condo owners, restaurants have to wait

► 800 show up at Gulf Shores meeting to hear about oil spill compensation process

By RYAN DEZEMBER
Staff Reporter

GULF SHORES — A manager for the adjustment service hired by BP PLC to vet claims of income lost because of the Gulf of Mexico oil spill said Wednesday that he would immediately begin to write checks for fishermen, deckhands and others who make a living on the water.

Mike Schulte, a catastrophe manager for ESIS Inc., also told a gathering of about 800 coastal residents and business owners that they should begin now to file claims related to lost tourism revenue. He cautioned, however, that such claims would be more complicated and may take more time to sort through than the claims of fishermen.

Schulte's proclamation that fishermen would be receiving imminent compensation was applauded by the overflow crowd at Erie Meyer Civic Center. But when he warned that restaurants, hotels and condo owners might not see money for lost business until after the spill is contained and the total fiscal damage tallied, he was interrupted.

"That's how we pay our mortgages!" one woman shouted.

South Baldwin County's business community has been smarting since the collapse of the coastal real estate market. One bright spot for business owners has been the summer tourism season, which has continued to grow despite the sour economy.

As Orange Beach Mayor Tony Kennon told a BP representative at a separate meeting Tuesday night, "They've been hanging on, waiting for Memorial Day like a kid waiting for Christmas."

Whether any tar balls ever wash up on Gulf Shores' beaches or sheen ever laps at the hulls of Orange Beach's charter fishing fleet, much damage has already been done as coastal businesses field a rash of cancellations from jittery vacationers.

"We're going to clean up the spill and we will honor every legitimate claim — and that's a promise," said Bruce Johnson, BP's representative at Wednesday's forum. "It wasn't our accident but it's absolutely our responsibility and we will fix it."

Kennon said that while he was increasingly comfortable with the way BP is managing cleanup efforts, he remains concerned about a looming "economic tsunami" striking south Baldwin County.

"The environmental aspect is very important and we have that, I think, under control," Kennon said. "But I want to see a concurrent or parallel course for some type of economic assistance ... that is available for us to start withdrawing from immediately."

Schulte said ESIS has established a hotline — 800-440-0858 — and a Bayou La Batre office at 13290 N. Wintzell Ave. to field claims from those who believe they have lost income because of the spill. Those residents — who could range from hoteliers, restaurant owners

and fishing captains to desk clerks, waitstaff and deckhands — should contact adjusters immediately, he said. Once they do, they'll be assigned a claim number and can expect a timely call from an adjuster who will explain how to document their case.

"We're trying to keep the documentation to a minimum but we do need to verify the losses," Schulte said. "We'll be looking at cancellations, we'll be looking at prior occupancy rates."

In the meantime, state tourism officials are readying their post-spill campaign to bring visitors back to the beach. Alabama Tourism Director

Lee Sentell said that his office would have a pair of television commercials ready to air as early as next week.

One will highlight the area's charter fishing fleet. The other, he said, will focus on the beach: "Part of the voiceover says, 'It's June of 2010 and the beaches of Alabama have never been more beautiful. Come back to your favorite beach.'"