

More than 50 days have passed since the Gulf oil well began gushing into our coastal waters, forcing the shutdown of fishing for much of the area and eventually impacting our local beaches. It's difficult to calculate the total economic impact of the ongoing spill, since unlike a major hurricane, it could last for months. However, there is no ambiguity over one thing – the victims of this spill, our local workers and business people – demand and have a right to compensation for economic damages.

BP has pledged to not only pay for clean-up, but also to pay damage claims to those hurt by this catastrophic event which it has caused. I have made clear to BP officials at the highest levels that I expect nothing less and I am working with the federal and state government to hold them fully accountable, including the speedy processing of damage claims.

As I mentioned in this column days after the well blowout, the spill is going to affect the entire regional economy, from shrimpers, to oystermen, commercial and recreational fishermen, restaurateurs, hotel and condominium resort managers, and realtors, to name just a few. By all accounts, this prediction has proven to be correct.

I am hearing from fishermen who cannot fish and from seafood processors who have no product to process. All down the supply chain businesses are being impacted, and now that oil has begun to wash upon local shores, hotel and condo rental owners, restaurants, souvenir shops, and other local businesses are also suffering. A recent Washington, DC newspaper story noted tourists are heading to Virginia and other East Coast beaches this summer rather than the Gulf Coast.

To handle damage claims, BP reports that it has deployed 530 adjusters along the Gulf Coast and the company's 24 hour a day, 7 day a week call center is staffed by 130 persons. Last week, Governor Bob Riley called in the resources and manpower of the Alabama National Guard and Emergency Management Agency to assist local residents and businesses in completing damage claims.

BP says it has already paid \$10 million in response to 9,363 Alabama damage claims filed as of June 10. BP is manning local claims centers in Foley, Gulf Shores/Orange Beach, and at Bayou La Batre. BP's full time claims processing center is reachable toll-free at 1-800-440-0858.

While BP may be making an effort, my offices are hearing from local residents and businesses who are having difficulty with the BP claims process. I have contacted BP's senior leadership and told them that such unnecessary delays and red tape in claims processing are unacceptable. The company must ramp up its efforts to accommodate claims filers and the federal government should also step in where needed to ensure damages are paid in a timely manner.

In response to growing frustration over claims payment delays, Admiral Thad Allen, head of the federal response effort, has requested the company's claims data in order to "assess how well the process is meeting the critical needs of individuals, families, and businesses whose livelihoods are being impacted by the spill." This is but the first step in holding BP accountable as government oversight into BP's claims process is expanded.

Another area of concern is BP's handling of its Vessel of Opportunity Program (VOO). To date, BP has hired 4,374 boats in the VOO program, including 806 from Alabama. While BP created the program to pay fishermen and other boat owners to assist in oil skimming and other clean-up efforts, my offices are hearing complaints that BP is not giving preference to local boat owners and commercial fishermen, and in some cases is not even responding to follow-up inquiries.

I have expressed my concern to BP over these reports and asked that local boat owners be given priority in the VOO program. For those who wish to apply for work under the Vessel of Opportunity program, call 1-877-847-7470. If you have applied for work under BP's VOO program and wish to get updates on the status of your application, call BP at 1-877-847-7470 or 1-866-279-7983.

Last week, as oil reached our Gulf beaches and Perdido Pass, Governor Riley announced that the U.S. Coast Guard has finally provided the state with the amount of boom it requested. The state has deployed over 435,000 feet of boom along the coast and has another 235,000 feet of boom in reserve to reinforce the protection of environmentally sensitive areas.

Unfortunately, as we have seen in locations such as Perdido Pass, the boom is not always effective. It is merely a band-aid solution until the gushing well can be permanently capped and BP and the federal government are able to contain the bulk of the oil already in the Gulf.

My staff and I work for you. If we can ever be of service, do not hesitate to call my office toll free at 1-800-288-8721.