

Last week President Barack Obama made his first visit to coastal Alabama to assess the physical and economic damage caused by the Gulf oil spill. He spent several hours in our backyard, visiting the oil spill response staging area at the U.S. Coast Guard station in Theodore, taking the ferry from Dauphin Island to Fort Morgan and traveling over to Orange Beach to eat at Tacky Jack's before leaving for Florida.

During his time in our state, hundreds lined the roads to both welcome the president and display posters offering a variety of opinions on his handling of the oil spill. I had an opportunity to personally thank the president for his trip to Alabama and to urge a stronger federal role in combating this ongoing crisis, especially in the area of clean-up and claims processing.

Much as we appreciated the president's visit, there were some disappointments. His brief time in our area did not allow for a dialogue with a cross section of the community to hear first-hand from people whose lives are being impacted.

This was also a lost opportunity for him to communicate his administration's efforts to assist communities and individuals. Nevertheless, we along the Gulf Coast will hold the president to his promise that "things will return to normal."

Oval Office Address:

Immediately after the president's trip to the Mississippi, Alabama and Florida Gulf Coast, he returned to the White House to speak live to the nation about the oil spill.

In his first Oval Office address, Mr. Obama laid out what he called his "battle plan" for tackling the spill, cleaning up the oil and helping those who've been impacted by it. While he didn't provide a lot of specifics, the president did promise that BP would be able to capture up to 90 percent of the leaking oil in the coming weeks.

He also announced new leadership at the Minerals Management Service - the federal agency in charge of enforcing oil industry regulations. Calling for better regulations, better safety standards and better enforcement of offshore drilling, the president also used his speech as an opportunity to plug his new energy policy, which would force the country to adopt alternative energy in lieu of fossil fuels.

With due respect to the president, most folks along the Gulf Coast who listened to his address were hoping for more detail about how he intends to protect our shoreline right now, instead of talk about more regulation and new energy policy.

Without a doubt, Congress and the administration will carefully study the causes of the oil spill, but it would be wise to wait for those findings before the federal government seeks to impose new regulations. We don't yet know if the Deepwater Horizon disaster could have been prevented had existing federal regulators simply done their jobs.

BP Claims Trust Fund Established:

One of the biggest complaints the president heard while visiting Alabama last week was the slow manner in which BP has been processing damage claims. In some cases, businesses have not been able to secure any payments for legitimate claims. I have met with BP officials and also Admiral Thad Allen, head of the federal response team, urging a quick solution to this unacceptable situation.

In his Oval Office address, the president called on BP to establish a trust fund to cover the economic damages of those along the Gulf Coast. The following day the president announced that BP's leaders agreed to the plan, creating a \$20 billion claims trust fund over the next four years to be administered by an independent adjudicator.

While the details of the claims fund are still being worked out, the agreement is a positive development in that it will help ensure adequate funds are reserved to pay claims. Given the extent of the economic impact of the oil spill across our region, the total amount of damages will be significant and the need will be long lasting.

But, it's not enough to simply create a trust fund. The public also needs to be assured that whatever new system is established to continue processing claims will not in any way further delay pending claims or complicate the application process.

Furthermore, it is not yet clear what role the federal government will play in processing claims and what will happen to the existing claims personnel. Congress should very closely monitor the progress of the BP claims trust fund and keep pressure on the administration and BP to guarantee timely and fair claims processing, especially during the transition.

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.