

More than 70 days into the oil spill, BP's inability to successfully and completely cap the gushing well a mile beneath the Gulf has generated hundreds of phone calls and emails to my office.

In addition to offering possible fixes, most people ask why BP had no contingency plan to deal with such a disaster or why the military has not been called into service to offer better command and control to the overall Gulf oil response effort?

BP was clearly unprepared, but, thus far, the oil company is the only entity with the tools to stop the leak. The Defense Department has assured my office that it lacks the resources to handle such a complex operation a mile down beneath the Gulf.

While the federal government has been largely unable to assist BP in sealing the well, it does have the ability to minimize the impact of the ongoing spill at the water's surface. Accordingly, one of the most common questions I continue to receive is why hasn't the Obama administration lifted the Jones Act, or other federal regulatory obstacles, so foreign oil skimmers can join in the oil clean-up?

The Jones Act is a federal law which prohibits the shipment of merchandise between U.S. ports by foreign built, staffed and owned vessels. The 1920 law, which was intended to protect the interests of U.S. shipping, only applies within three miles of U.S. shorelines. However, the majority of the oil spill is much farther out in the Gulf and the Jones Act specifically exempts oil spill response vessels.

Despite persistent media reports to the contrary, Admiral Thad Allen, the head of the federal response effort, has confirmed the Jones Act has not blocked any foreign ships from participating in Gulf oil skimming operations.

Reportedly, 68 foreign governments and nearly 40 other groups have made offers to assist in the clean-up. At least 15 foreign-flagged vessels are operating in the Gulf now, with more being considered.

While the Jones Act's role in delaying or blocking the approval of foreign ships has been overstated, the fact that delays are occurring – for any reason – is absolutely unacceptable and must be addressed as soon as possible.

Rather than the Jones Act slowing down the process, it appears other bureaucratic red tape is the real culprit, including U.S. "reciprocity" laws which block ships from countries with which the U.S. does not have existing agreements.

It is shortsighted, in my view, to enforce such rules at a time of national disaster, and I have called on the federal government to lift such restrictions.

This past week I have sent letters to President Obama, EPA Director Lisa Jackson, and Admiral Thad Allen expressing strong disappointment over the handling of the spill response to date. I called on each to act immediately to remove all bureaucratic hurdles slowing the response effort, to improve command and control over the response, and to act with the sense of urgency

this crisis demands.

Furthermore, this past week I cosponsored legislation in the U.S. House to lift the Jones Act for Gulf cleanup.

Honoring America's Independence and Our Military Heroes:

The celebration of our nation's independence is a time for family gatherings, cook-outs and fireworks. As Americans, we share a common bond of freedom, hope and opportunity in this land that is unequalled anywhere else on earth.

It's also a time to remember the sacrifices of those who secured our freedoms over the generations since the War of Independence, as well as those who continue to serve in defense of liberty across the globe.

We are reminded of the heavy price of freedom each time one of our own is injured or loses their life while wearing the uniform of our country.

On June 9, South Alabama lost a hero, as U.S. Air Force Staff Sergeant David Smith of Eight Mile was killed in a Taliban rocket attack on his helicopter in southern Afghanistan.

Staff Sgt. Smith, who at the young age of 26 was participating in a rescue operation of his comrades, was just five days away from completing his combat service at the time of his death.

Our hearts and our prayers go out to his mother, Mildred Hardee, his fiancée, brothers, sisters and family and friends.

This great nation was won 234 years ago through the sacrifice of our brave military and is protected today by heroes who are willing to step up in our greatest time of need. We owe so much to all those who are called to serve.

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.