

The national television news crews that once kept a vigil along our shores are long gone. So are the coast-to-coast front-page headlines with sensational photos of oil-soaked wildlife and fouled Gulf beaches.

Even though the rest of America has moved on to other breaking news, for the residents and business owners of the Alabama Gulf Coast, the great oil spill of 2010 is not a faded memory. Its impact is still with us and will likely remain for many years to come.

On the evening of Wednesday, April 20, 2010, as many of us went about our daily lives, a crew of workers out in the Gulf of Mexico was laboring on their deep water well when suddenly methane gas sprang upward into their drilling rig. Minutes later, two explosions shook the Deepwater Horizon, taking the lives of 11 crewmen and injuring more than a dozen others. Two days later the giant flaming structure sank beneath the waves. Then began an 87-day ordeal to seal the gushing blown-out well which would ultimately unleash five million barrels of crude oil into the Gulf.

Last Friday marked two years since that tragic day that quickly disrupted the economy and ecosystem of a whole region of America. In hindsight, we know that the 2010 blowout of the Deepwater Horizon well was the greatest environmental disaster in U.S. history. After two years of clean-up, the five states directly affected by the economic and ecological war that the spill unleashed upon us are still fighting for recovery funds.

Recovery is the watchword today. There is much more to our regional recovery than simply cleaning the beaches and recapturing oil adrift in the Gulf. The visible scars of that terrible ordeal are largely erased, but still hidden underneath lies the uncertainty of the long-term environmental impact of the unprecedented spill.

In late 2010, local, state and federal officials from along the Gulf Coast teamed up with our business community and environmental organizations to do something about it. They created a strategy to not only recover from the disaster, but also to strengthen our resources and improve coordination in the event we should be visited by such a calamity again.

Here in Congress, I joined with fellow Gulf Coast lawmakers to introduce legislation to provide the financial resources to implement this recovery strategy. The RESTORE Act has passed the Senate and the groundwork for the legislation passed the House last week. It would direct 80 percent of Clean Water Act fines collected from the 2010 oil spill to the five Gulf states, including Alabama, for restoration.

Just as sealing the blown-out well and cleaning our beaches and estuaries was not easy, the effort to pass this vital legislation has been marked with challenges. In the coming months, I am hopeful that a final version of this vital recovery legislation can be approved and sent to the president's desk.

Gulf Coast Claims Facility Audit Completed:

On the second anniversary of the oil spill, details of a three-month independent audit of the Gulf Coast Claims Facility were finally made public.

Prompted by many complaints of slow claims processing and a lack of transparency in the GCCF's claims approval system, I asked U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder for an outside review of the GCCF's operations.

While the review found no major inconsistencies within the GCCF's claims operations, it did point out that Mr. Ken Feinberg's claims facility suffered some communications failures and made mistakes in applying criteria to all claimants.

The auditors determined that some 7,300 claims were "negatively affected" by GCCF decisions. It says the GCCF is now working to resolve those claims which are estimated to be worth \$64 million.

While the volume of the oil spill damage claims reviewed by the GCCF was historic in both number and geographical extent, that does not excuse any shortcomings of Mr. Feinberg's claims system to adequately address all legitimate claims.

My staff and I are still carefully studying the audit results and will follow up with the Justice Department if needed in order to insure that all claims are treated fairly.

BCS Champion Crimson Tide Visits the White House:

The White House South Lawn was ablaze with Crimson and White last Thursday afternoon as President Obama welcomed the 2011 BCS National Champion University of Alabama football team to Washington.

This was the second time in three years that the Crimson Tide and Coach Nick Saban have been treated with a White House visit. In return, they presented a team jersey and helmet to President Obama.

Congratulations to the team, the coaching staff, the supportive families and all the loyal Bama fans.

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.

For release: April 23, 2012