



All About Florida

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**Statement by Bill Williams
Gulf County Commissioner (Florida)**

**House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Wednesday, December 7, 2011
Rayburn Building, Room 2167**

Chair, Congressman John Mica (FL)

On behalf of Florida's 67 counties, and more specifically the coastal counties, I would like to thank Chairman Mica and the committee members for the opportunity to address the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure this morning.

On April 20, 2010 catastrophe struck. Eleven men lost their lives in this senseless tragedy and the Gulf of Mexico and her treasured coast were changed forever. Looking back I realize that time has allowed many wounds to heal and hindsight provides us with many lessons learned. While the hurt lessens and our communities slowly come back, we cannot forget the pain and suffering and the long term, possible permanent, environmental and economic tragedy that was inflicted on America's Gulf Coast.

While many of you may know our counties as tourist destinations, we are in reality often small communities with few full time residents making an income off of one resource – the Gulf of Mexico. The Gulf is abundant and generous in providing a spectacular shoreline, and a vast resource for recreational and commercial fishing.



Immediately following the Oil Spill, every citizen and county mobilized to protect their shoreline from the impact of oil washing on beaches and destroying our environment and economy. We invested resources we didn't have, to lay down boom and build berms to protect against oil. Immediately, visitors left, tourists canceled reservations and restaurants across the country stopped serving Gulf seafood. Our economy collapsed in a day and our environment was threatened forever.

All the boom still could not stop the oil and we stood by helplessly as we watched tar mats and tar balls mar our white sand beaches. Workers in hazmat suits trolled the beaches day and night but it was too late – the beaches were empty, everyone had gone home and no one else was coming.

Our fishing vessels normally used to harvest the best tasting shrimp, grouper and snapper you can imagine were now collecting oil in nets – the equivalent of using a cotton ball to clean up a barrel of oil. Fishing was no longer an option.

Apalachicola, famous for her amazing fresh oysters, was deserted. Her oysters if not spoiled, no one was willing to eat them and our oystermen were out of work.

These are just a few of countless stories around the Gulf of the impact of this tragedy and resources wasted in a futile attempt to stop oil that was coming anyway.

It is often in tragedy that we find our true strength, strangers become friends and fighting together becomes more important than culture, religion or politics. The Deep Water Horizon Oil Spill was no different. Citizens joined with government, cities joined with counties, counties with states and states became partners.

Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida are unified. We have suffered this tragedy together and we can rebuild together – IF we are giving the tools to do so.

Our communities have pulled together to try our best to recovery from this tragedy. It is easy to be deceived by appearances and placated by the surface of our communities seemingly back to normal – but buried under our sand is oil.

Our seafood industries continue to fight the perception of damage and contamination and as my friend from USF will testify – the damage to the Gulf is not yet fully realized.

Not only is there much left to do to help our environment recover from the tar and damage, we know there is still oil out there – where, when and how it will cause its damage is unknown and the Gulf Coast must be armed with the tools and resources to respond when it does.

When a mistake is made we teach our children to stand up, take responsibility – to make it right. BP has done that and is continuing to do that, but it does not absolve them and others from paying the consequences for this disaster. Florida supports House Bill 3096 and asks that each of you support this important bill.

In these tight economic times, I understand the temptation to use these monies to fill holes, but I encourage and ask each of you to do what is right. To acknowledge that if this were your home, your livelihood – you would expect ask the same. I ask each of you to see the Gulf of Mexico for the national treasure she is - she provides our children with gentle waves to jump in, our families with beaches to lounge on and more importantly she provides five states and dozens

of counties – with the not just a livelihood but a home – a home that deserves to be restored, protected and promised the same future held before this tragedy.

This bill solidifies BP's responsibility to make right, by ensuring that those directly impacted from this tragedy can one day hope to be made whole.

We are here to help and assist your committee in any way possible and hope you will continue to use us a resource. On behalf of Florida, I thank you for this opportunity to be here.

I am happy to answer any questions or provide additional information.