

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010

Remarks at the United States Coast Guard Station Panama City in Panama City Beach, Florida

August 14, 2010

Good afternoon, everybody. It is a privilege to be here in Panama City Beach with the men and women of the United States Coast Guard. I wanted to come here personally and express my gratitude to you for the effort that you've waged in response to the BP oil spill. And I know Michelle wanted to do the same, so we're looking forward to having a chance to shake hands with you and thank you personally for this great work that you've been doing day in, day out.

Michelle, just last month, was down in Mississippi, where she met folks from the Coast Guard about the spill, and she had the chance to christen the new cutter the *Stratton*.

The Coast Guard was the first on the scene, immediately launching a search-and-rescue operation for the missing. You were the first to recognize that we were potentially looking at a massive spill even before the rig collapsed and the oil began to leak from the seafloor. And a day and a half later, in a meeting with Thad Allen and others, I instructed the Coast Guard, the Department of Homeland Security, and other agencies to treat this response as their number-one priority. And that's exactly what all of you have done.

Under the leadership of Admiral Allen, the Coast Guard, along with other Federal agencies and State and local governments, has directed the largest response to an environmental disaster in American history. The response has included more than 7,000 vessels and more than 47,000 people on the ground. And I know that two cutters, the *Aspen* and the *Juniper*, are here in port this week, after tours skimming and performing other recovery work. As I said before, many of the folks here have toiled day and night, spending weeks, even months, away from their families to stop the leak, remove the oil, and protect waters and coastline. So I want to thank all those who continue to participate in this effort.

I also want to make mention and thank Dr. Steven Chu and our team of scientists assembled from across Federal agencies, around the country, and all over the world, who have been working nonstop to kill the well once and for all. This has not only been the biggest oil spill in our history; it's also been the most technologically complex. It pushed the boundaries of our scientific know-how, as engineers wrestled with a massive and unpredictable leak and faced setbacks, faced complications, all in pitch-black waters nearly a mile beneath the surface of the Gulf.

Well, today the well is capped. Oil is no longer flowing into the Gulf. It has not been flowing for a month. And I'm here to tell you that our job is not finished, and we are not going anywhere until it is. That's a message that I wanted to come here and deliver directly to the people along the Gulf Coast, because it's the men and women of this region who have felt the burden of this disaster. They've watched with anger and dismay as their livelihoods and their way of life was threatened these past few months. And that's why I made a commitment in my visits here that I was going to stand with you not just until the well was closed, not just until the oil was cleaned up, but until you have fully recovered from the damage that's been done. And that is a commitment that my administration is going to keep.

That also is why my Secretary of the Navy, Ray Mabus, is here. A former Governor of Mississippi, a son of the Gulf, he has been traveling all across this region, gathering up information and data to make sure that we are following through on our commitments for rebuilding.

I reiterated this just now when I met with a few small-business owners from the Panama City area, along with Governor Charlie Crist, and not only the mayors of this region, but also some of the business owners who are affected, folks like Captain Gary Jarvis, a charter boat operator from Destin. Gary started fishing as a deckhand back in 1978, and he's been captain for the past three decades, making his living on the water. He's lost fully half of his business because of the spill, though he's been able to use his boat as a vessel of opportunity to make some money in the past few months. And he's extraordinarily knowledgeable about these waters, being both a charter fisherman and a commercial fisherman. And he had some terrific suggestions about how, working with scientists from NOAA and other Federal agencies, we can do even more to make sure that we are monitoring and maintaining and improving the fishing off the coast of Florida and across the Gulf.

I also had a chance to speak to Lee Ann Leonard, general manager of By the Sea Resorts. She's seen a big decline in tourism. June wasn't too bad, but July was tough. And she's now hoping that August, September, and October can help them rebound from what have been significant losses.

I met with Carolyn Holman, who's got two commercial fishing boats and owns the Captain's Table Fish House in Panama City Beach with her husband. And I appreciated the chance to sit down with them to hear firsthand what they've been going through and to make clear that we're going to keep standing by them. Part of the concern that Carolyn expressed was the issue of seafood and our testing and making sure that it's safe. And we are all over that and monitoring that carefully each and every day, hopefully continuing to deliver good news as the days go on. And I mentioned to her that we already had some seafood in the White House. When the New Orleans Saints came up, we had a couple of po' boys. So right now we're feeling pretty good.

I also want to recognize that Mayor Gayle Oberst and Mayor Scott Clemons had some terrific suggestions about how we might help to diversify the economies down here so that they're in a better position to, if we ever had a crisis again, manage it, but more importantly, to provide more jobs and opportunity in this extraordinary and beautiful region.

Now, I want to go over a couple of the steps that we are going to be focused on over the next several weeks. First and foremost, we're going to continue to monitor and remove any oil that reaches the surface and clean up any oil that hits the shore. As I mentioned, Gary has been offering up his ship as a vessel of opportunity, and he confirms what you've been seeing in the news reports, which is there aren't a lot of patches out there that are visible right now. But we've got to constantly anticipate that at any given time you might see a patch of oil that starts coming in, and we've got to be able to capture that before it hits these beautiful beaches around here.

As a result of the massive cleanup operation that's already taken place, a recent report by our top scientists found that the majority of oil has now evaporated or dispersed or it's been burned, skimmed, or recovered from the wellhead. And the dispersed oil is in the process of degrading. But I will not be satisfied until the environment has been restored, no matter how long it takes.

I also want to point out that as a result of the cleanup effort, beaches all along the Gulf Coast are clean, they are safe, and they are open for business. That's one of the reasons Michelle, Sasha, and I are here. The Governor and the mayors and others invited us down to enjoy the beach and the water, to let our fellow Americans know that they should come on down here. It is spectacular. Not just to support the region; come down here because it's just a beautiful place to visit.

Next we're going to continue testing fisheries, and we'll be reopening more areas for fishing as tests show that the waters are safe. Already, more than 26,000 square miles were reopened at the end of July and another 5,000 were reopened earlier this week. I know this takes some time, and it's been incredibly hard on the people who earn their living on the water. Carolyn's boats, for example, have had to find different areas to fish that are further away and require more fuel, so she's been having to make some decisions, maybe I don't send out my boat this time out. But their livelihoods, not to mention the health of the people across this country, obviously depends on making sure that folks can trust the seafood coming from the Gulf, trust that it's safe, as it always has been.

And as I told Carolyn, we've already been enjoying Gulf seafood, but we are going to keep on monitoring this to make sure that everybody's favorite seafood from the Gulf and favorite recipes are going to be treated—are going to be just fine.

The third thing we're focused on is claims. When I came down to the Gulf previously, I heard a lot of frustration about the way BP was handling claims. So in June I met with BP's executives, and in that meeting they agreed to put aside \$20 billion in a special fund to pay damages. It's being run by an independent overseer so that people can trust that they'll get a fair shake. Now we need to make sure claims are processed quickly, because many who have lost their only source of income, they don't have a lot of leeway. They don't have months to wait to be compensated. The folks we just met with—Lee Ann, Gary, Carolyn—they've all got outstanding claims. So I want to be clear about this. Any delay by BP or those managing the new funds are unacceptable. And I will keep pushing to get these claims expedited.

Finally, I have charged, as I mentioned earlier, Ray Mabus to develop a long-term Gulf Coast restoration plan as soon as possible. That plan needs to come from the people in the Gulf, which is why he's been meeting with folks from across the region to develop this plan of action. That's how we can ensure that we do everything in our power to restore the environment and reverse the economic damage caused by the spill.

So, with the closure of the well we mark an important milestone. But this is not the end of the journey. And in completing the work ahead I'm reminded of what I heard when I was in Louisiana back in June. I spent time with folks on Grand Isle, meeting with fishermen and small-business owners and the town's mayor, David Camardelle. And he told me what his friends and neighbors were going through. He talked about how hard things had been. But he also explained the way folks rallied to support one another, he said, the people in this community may not have a lot of money, but that didn't matter. "We help each other," he said. "That's what we do."

That's what folks do for one another in the Gulf. That's what the Coast Guard has been doing for folks in need. That's what we do as Americans. And my job is to make sure that we live up to this responsibility, that we keep up our efforts until the environment is clean, polluters are held accountable, businesses and communities are made whole, and the people of the Gulf Coast are back on their feet.

So to the men and women of the Coast Guard, thank you again for your extraordinary service. To the people here in the Gulf, we are going to be standing by your side. And to Americans all across the country, come on down and visit.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Adm. Thad W. Allen, USCG (Ret.), in his capacity as national incident commander for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill; Secretary of Energy Steven Chu; Gov. Charles J. Crist, Jr., of Florida; Mayor Gayle Oberst of Panama City Beach, FL; Mayor Scott Clemons of Panama City, FL; and Special Master for TARP Executive Compensation Kenneth R. Feinberg, in his capacity as administrator of the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill compensation fund.

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