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House Natural Resources Committee

"Gulf of Mexico: A Focus on Community Recovery and New Response Technology."

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Committee today relating to the recovery of the Seafood Community relating to the impact of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and what you and Congress can do to help. I am Mike Voisin, a 7th generation seafood harvester and seafood processor in South Louisiana. The spill has clearly been an ecological and human challenge that will surely effect not only the fragile habitats where fisheries, including shrimp and oysters are harvested but the very core of the community that brings these iconic delicacies from the waters of the Gulf to the tables of America. The Gulf community is one built not only on the bounty of pure waters but on the backs of small business men and women whose families, like mine, emigrated to the shores of Louisiana; called by the sea and a culture like no other in this country. That culture and those Americans need your support during these challenging times. Fishermen, shrimpers and oystermen who harvest safe, healthy seafood from the Gulf are being impacted by the marketability and brand of their harvest.

At this point, there are many ways in which Congress and the Committee can support our local economy as we work to recover one year after the Deepwater Horizon spill. In the last year, the Gulf coast seafood community has worked diligently to identify several outstanding challenges and I would like to take this opportunity to highlight a few solutions that could use your support.

First, it is imperative that consumers regain confidence in the safety and quality of Gulf coast seafood. In a poll conducted by Louisiana State University in October, 75% of all consumers still expressed a "high-level" of concern that seafood from the Gulf of Mexico would be tainted with oil and dispersants – a concern that is completely unfounded yet continues to plague our local seafood economy. According to extensive testing done by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the individual states, over 99% of the 300,000 organisms sampled are completely safe, wholesome and ready for your family's dinner table. At a time when the federal government is increasing its daily recommendation for seafood consumption because of its proven health benefits, we must be aggressive in alleviating any unfounded concerns about Gulf coast seafood products.

On March 3rd, a delegation of 34 Senators and Members of Congress, many who sit on this Committee, signed a letter to President Obama outlining the need for stronger communication with the American public regarding the safety of Gulf Seafood. The Administration promptly responded with the rollout of additional NOAA testing and a reinvigorated effort to promote the results of these tests. However, I fear this may not be enough. Going forward, there may be a significant opportunity to address the long term marketing needs of the Gulf Coast seafood community in the form of federal legislation being drafted to direct Clean Water Act penalties back to the Gulf Coast for environmental and economic rehabilitation. Given the ongoing perception challenges we face with consumers, I strongly recommend that a portion of any Clean Water Act penalties be set aside specifically for Gulf coast seafood marketing. This type of expenditure would not be a luxury but a necessity to ensure the healing of our local seafood economy.

Next, Congress should pass legislation that would defer income taxes for small business reimbursements that are re-invested in the local economy. As it stands, small businesses who receive lump sum payments from BP to cover lost profits may incur significant income tax liability. In the oyster industry specifically, we stand to receive payments that would cover up to four years of lost income at once and, as you can imagine, the tax responsibilities of receiving that much income in one year are astronomical. Let it be known that we are not seeking any kind of tax “holiday” – we would support requiring business owners to pay the full amount owed on any portion of the income that is not promptly reinvested in our local community. This deferral would simply give our neighbors impacted by the oil spill adequate opportunity to put these reimbursement payments to the best use in our local economy.

Last December, a group of Gulf Coast senators led by Senator Roger Wicker from Mississippi worked diligently to include language to address this income tax issue in the tax cut package that was signed into law prior to the 111th Congress adjourning. Despite the efforts of Senators Wicker, Vitter, Landrieu and others, this language was not included in the final legislation, yet the need is still great. In light of today being federal “tax day”, I strongly urge the Committee to take this request back to Washington, D.C. and nudge your colleagues on the House Ways and Means and Senate Finance Committees along on this important matter.

Lastly, I would strongly urge Members of this Committee to get behind H.R. 1228, the Natural Resources Restoration Act. This legislation was recently introduced by Representative Landry in the House and Senator Vitter in the Senate and requires a down payment on the Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) process in

order to expedite funds BP and other responsible parties will pay to help address natural resources harmed by the Deepwater Horizon spill. Under current law, the NRDA process can take anywhere from 10 – 20 years and this is time we in the seafood community simply do not have. H.R. 1228 would ensure that those responsible for last year's oil spill come to the table with state trustees within 30 days to negotiate a portion of the payments that would be made up front to affected communities. This type of streamlined, public-private process is exactly the type of effort that will ensure our local oyster beds, estuaries, wetlands, and fish stocks are addressed now so that local communities can benefit long into the future.

Charles Darwin said," It is not the strong that survive, it is not the most intelligent, but those that survive are those that adapt to change". We have been challenged many times in the past several years and we have adapted to the changes necessary to survive and to thrive, with your help we will not only survive but once again thrive!

Thank you again for this opportunity to address you and I would be glad to answer any questions that you might have at the appropriate time.