

BP Funds Gulf Coast Seafood Program

WALLY NORTHWAY, Mississippi Business Journal

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — No two industries were more affected by the explosion in 2010 of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig than restaurant/hospitality and commercial fishing on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

The oil spill that spewed hundreds of millions of gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico kept tourists away and left Gulf Coast-caught seafood with a black eye among consumers.

However, a new promotional effort has been launched to assist those industries' recovery, and it is being funded by BP, the owner of the Deepwater Horizon.

Inspired by the success of the Mississippi Blues Trail and Mississippi Country Music Trail, Mike Cashion, executive director of the Mississippi Hospitality & Restaurant Association, has unveiled the new Seafood Trails Program, a tourism-promotion initiative that spotlights restaurants that offer Gulf Coast-caught seafood.

Cashion said last year's program "Every Shrimp Has a Tale" — also funded by a BP Tourism Promotional Fund grant and aimed at giving consumers a chance to track their shrimp from the Gulf to their plate — was successful, and BP wanted a similar program this year. However, the Every Shrimp Has a Tale Program was limited to a 13-week run, was very technical and expensive, relying entirely on BP funding.

So, looking to 2014 Cashion had a different vision.

"I wanted to create a legacy program, one that was less technical and expensive and could stand on its own and benefit restaurants and the seafood industry long after the BP grant money is gone," Cashion said.

"We have music trails here in Mississippi, and other states have culinary or food trails. We're looking to do the same here in Mississippi, creating a trail that is more narrowly focused on seafood from the Gulf of Mexico."

Cashion said the Seafood Trails is a pilot program and is currently open to Gulf Coast restaurants only. However, if the program shows returns, the trail could expand in the future to include any Mississippi restaurant meeting the program's requirements.

Backers are buoyed by the early response. Cashion held a news briefing on the new initiative in Gulfport on May 7. More than two dozen restaurateurs attended. By May 9, Cashion had "a stack" of applications from prospective program participants on his desk.

"All I kept hearing from attendees (of the news briefing) was, 'This is a no-brainer,'"

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Cashion said, "and we have gotten heavy media coverage."

When asked if he felt that the public relations nightmare cause by the 2010 oil spill was behind local restaurants and the Mississippi seafood industry, Cashion hesitated, then said, "Well, it's changing."

To be considered for inclusion in the Seafood Trails Program, restaurants must offer at least five menu items featuring seafood caught in the Gulf of Mexico through Dec. 14. Cashion and Grady Griffin, the association's educational director, will oversee the project, and a focus group will manage marketing and advertising as well as media purchases.

Other criteria include:

- During the time periods selected, participating restaurants must exhibit marketing material as provided and as applicable.
- Participating restaurants agree to train and educate their staff on the Seafood Trails Program to enhance the guest experience. The association will, at the invitation of the participant, provide on-location service training for the participating restaurant at no cost to the restaurant.
- The association will play no role in either pricing of product or pricing of menu items. Securing approved product is the responsibility of participating restaurants, and it will provide consultation whenever possible.
- For grant reporting purposes, participating restaurants must submit to the restaurant association information on any sales increase or decrease over the same period from the previous year and provide operator feedback on the pros and cons of the program.
- Participating restaurants agree to comply with the provisions of the program's memorandum of understanding. Under no circumstances may participating restaurants misrepresent product being featured in the Seafood Trails Program. Featured products must be of Gulf of Mexico origin.
- Participating restaurants will be subject to random product audits to ensure the integrity of the marketing claim.

In the event of a material breach of any of the provisions of this agreement, the restaurant association can discontinue the participation of the non-compliant restaurant.

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