

Plaintiffs Lawyers Gather to Strategize Oil Spill Suits

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Plaintiffs lawyers are converging on New Orleans today for another Gulf Coast oil spill gathering to discuss everything from the parallels with the Exxon Valdez disaster to the best trial techniques to nail an oil giant. No doubt the lawyers will also try to draw some shade of meaning for future litigation from Tuesday's decision by U.S. District Judge Martin Feldman of New Orleans to block the Obama administration's six-month moratorium on deep-water drilling.

Scheduled speakers at the HarrisMartin Oil Spill Litigation Conference, to be held in the W Hotel New Orleans, hail from all over the country -- including lawyers from Mississippi, Minnesota, Ohio, New York and Texas who have handled environmental disasters, water contamination issues, government claims and RICO claims.

Attorneys with Minneapolis-based Lockridge Grindal Nauen, for example, are set to discuss lessons learned from the Exxon Valdez spill, including the 2008 U.S. Supreme Court decision on punitive damages, and the effects of the newly announced \$20 billion compensation fund on civil litigation.

Carla Burke of Dallas-based Baron & Budd will offer expertise on water contamination. Brent Coon of Houston's Brent Coon & Associates, who has litigated against BP PLC in the past, will discuss BP's safety record. And Dana Taschner of The Lanier Law Firm in Los Angeles will talk about damage control and innovative trial techniques.

The conference's co-chairmen are Richard Arsenault of the Alexandria, La.-based personal injury firm **Neblett, Beard & Arsenault**, which has several oil spill lawsuits, and Johnny deGravelles of Baton Rouge, La.'s deGravelles, Palmintier, Holthaus and Frugé, which handles maritime and personal injury cases.

With the oil still gushing, those cases keep coming. The latest to join the fray: scuba divers.

Adventure Sports II of Montgomery, Ala., alleges that the oil spill is hurting business by scaring away potential divers. Its suit, *Adventure Sports II v. BP*, was filed in the Middle District of Alabama on June 17.

"Even when the water is clean and safe and dive sites are open, many travelers are still avoiding the Gulf Coast because of misconceptions about where the oil is now, and fears about where it might spread in the coming weeks and months," said Adventure Sports' lawyer, Rhon Jones of Montgomery's Beasley, Allen, Crow, Methvin, Portis & Miles.

Making matters worse, according to Jones, is that even when the rare customer does show up for a scuba session, it's tough to find a boat to take the person out because many boat operators are now working in BP's massive cleanup effort.

"I have heard a number of people say, 'I just can't get boats.'," said Jones, whose firm has eight other oil spill lawsuits pending.

Scuba divers aside, Jones said that more tourism-related plaintiffs are starting to surface as the vacation season gets under way and travelers cancel their plans. Everyone from t-shirt vendors to alligator-sighting businesses are contacting their lawyers, he said.

"The Gulf Shores/Orange Beach area [in Alabama] has been harder hit than anticipated," Jones said. "It's ugly looking down there."

The Adventure Sports lawsuit names BP, Halliburton and Cameron International Corp. as defendants. BP declined comment on pending litigation. Officials with Halliburton and Cameron were not available for comment.