

## **Parks and Campgrounds Remain Optimistic Despite Oil Spill** *Gulf Coast Businesses hoping that the media lets the public know that oil spill has not closed them down, and they are ready and waiting for summer season*

By Corey Grant, Woodall's Staff Writer

One of the most historically and economically important region in America's history, the Gulf Coast comprises the coastline of five different states—Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida—and possesses beautiful white beaches, lush marshlands, blue lagoons, and historical monuments spanning two-hundred years. The American Gulf Coast is also one of the most highly productive economic regions in the country, supporting fishing, aerospace, agriculture and tourism industries. However, the resilience of the people and businesses of the Gulf Coast has been tested within the last five years. First, in 2005 Hurricane Katrina caused widespread devastation and upwards of \$80 billion dollars worth of damage. The recent recession put a further strain on tourism and industries working from the Gulf Coast as they were slowly rebuilding. Now, the Deep Horizon platform that exploded on April 20<sup>th</sup>, and has been leaking oil into the Gulf of Mexico since then, has delivered yet another punch to coastal businesses. Yet, despite all the hardships, the RV Parks, Campgrounds, and local attractions are continuing to not only survive, but to grow.

Lee Sentell, Director of the Alabama Tourism Department, recently addressed businesses and officials at the annual Tourism Summit, and said that the 2010 tourist season “was going to be a blockbuster summer and still can be exceptionally strong if we do a good job of getting the message out.” This year, the Gulf Coast was to bring in \$20 billion worth of tourism dollars. Unfortunately, the constant media coverage surrounding the oil spill has caused many travelers to rethink or even cancel their plans to visit the Gulf Coast, based on speculations that the spill has greater damage to area than it really has. At **Cajun RV Park**, in Biloxi, MS, business is down close to 35% this month. Jonathan Mikovich who runs the park fields calls from potential campers who state the oil spill has them concerned. “I would say most of the people are mentioning it, but overall I think they are just looking for another destination to go totally because they don't want to have it impact their only week off of vacation they get.” Michele Richard, owner of **Bay Hide Away RV & Camping Resort** in Bay St. Louis, MS, says that decrease in business is in part caused by stories about the oil spill in the news. “I would definitely say that they media coverage has hurt businesses in the area,” she said. “Locals can see that everything is still open and running, but campers from out of state don't know how to decipher what they hear on the news about the oil spill.”

Reports still indicate that the main oil slick is still more than 50 miles offshore, and much of the Gulf Coast shoreline has been unaffected. All Mississippi Gulf Coast beaches are open, along with inshore fishing and all water activities. Of the nine Louisiana Coastal parishes, all are up and running, continuing to provide RVers and Campers with great historical attractions, great Cajun food, and beautiful RV parks and Campgrounds. The coastal city of Houma, Louisiana—known as “The Heart of America's Wetlands”—is bracing for the impact of the oil spill in their fishing industries and marshland habitats, but is stressing to the public that the area is largely untouched by the spill and RVers can

still enjoy everything the region has to offer. “We are open for business,” says Kelly Gustafson, spokesperson for **Houma Area Convention and Visitors Bureau**. “We ask that...readers support the Gulf Coast and continue with their travel plans.”

Some RV Parks are being proactive in spreading the news that the Gulf Coast region is ready and waiting for RVers. **Bella Terra of Gulf Shores** in Foley, AL, has coordinated a nationwide outreach to the RV community to support local parks and campgrounds in the area, and aid cleanup efforts in response to the oil spill. Working with the Alabama Gulf Coast Chamber of Commerce, **Bella Terra** is bringing thousands of volunteers, specifically in the RV Community, to the region and directing them in their clean-up training and getting them where they are most needed. “To date there are 5000+ individuals who have signed up to volunteer should clean up efforts be required in our region,” says Tripp Keber, COO of Bella Terra Realty. **Bella Terra** is also offering rental discounts to volunteers staying at the park, and on top of that, contributing 10% of all rental income over the next few weeks to the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program. “The Gulf Coast and it’s beaches are one of our country’s greatest national treasures...[and] we will do whatever we can as ‘good neighbors’ and as business owners to save these treasures,” says Keber.

**Anchors Aweigh RV Resort** also in Foley, AL and **Emerald Coast RV Beach Resort** in Panama City, FL, have joined the outreach with **Bella Terra** in assisting the volunteers and spreading the word about the viability of RV travel on the Gulf Coast. “The collective effort from area parks and resorts working together in unison to rally support will have a positive impact on not only the region, but the desire and ability of RVers to assist.”

The disaster of the BP oil spill, while tragic, is once again proving the resilience and tenacity of the Southern RV industry to survive, and flourish. The huge population of RVers and Campers continues to grow, and they continue to support and visit parks and campgrounds around the country, and the industry shows no sign of slowing down. This is especially true in the Gulf Coast, with many parks and campgrounds in the region, reporting that even with the negative media coverage, reservations are still coming in, and the summer season is in full swing. “Most of my guests told me that they didn’t ever worry about the oil spill hitting the coast,” says Sammie Warwick, manager of **Island Retreat RV Park** in Gulf Shores, AL. “They love the area so much, it doesn’t even matter to them.”

To join the outreach on sign up to volunteer, visit [www.bellaterrarvresort.com](http://www.bellaterrarvresort.com)  
For more on the Mobile bay Estuary Program, visit [www.mobilebaynep.com](http://www.mobilebaynep.com)  
Daily Oil Spill Trajectory Report with map, visit [www.noaa.gov](http://www.noaa.gov)  
Visit the parks mentioned at [www.woodalls.com](http://www.woodalls.com)