



## Matrix among Jersey companies helping with Gulf spill cleanup

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Venuri Siriwardane/The Star-Ledger



Photo courtesy of Erin Evertsen

Erin Evertsen, an employee of Matrix New World Engineering of East Hanover, catches a young brown pelican Wednesday near Grand Isle, La.

It's been nearly a month since Erin Evertsen rushed to Grand Isle, La. — a once-picturesque barrier island in the Gulf of Mexico, where white-sand beaches and delicate marshlands are now soiled with oil.

Each day, the 27-year-old biologist from Montclair rises at dawn and sets out with two other team members in search of birds soaked in the oil that spews daily from the Deepwater Horizon well.

Evertsen spends her 12-hour workday aboard a small craft, often with nothing but a flimsy canopy to shield her from the relentless Louisiana sun. As the boat skims across bayous dotted with mangrove trees, she scans the horizon for egrets, laughing gulls and the team's most common oil-coated quarry: brown pelicans.

If the birds need veterinary care, she gently scoops them up in nets, places them in dog kennels and ferries them to safety.

"It's an amazing feeling," Evertsen said of saving a bird's life. "Every animal that we catch here has a better chance of survival, and to be a part of the effort to save our natural resources is very gratifying."

Hers is a noble mission to rescue local wildlife, but it is also a livelihood. She earns a few hundred dollars a day working for East Hanover-based Matrix New World Engineering.

The firm has dispatched a "small battalion" of about 40 employees to the Gulf Coast, said Dennis Petrocelli, senior vice president and co-founder. Most are new hires, he added.

The spill, now more than two months old, is killing a decades-old way of life for fishermen, restaurant owners and many tourism businesses in the Gulf. But amid the hardship in some industries, the spill response — which cost BP \$2.65 billion as of Monday — has generated a boom for others, including several New Jersey firms. Like Matrix, most are BP contractors or subcontractors, and have earned the nickname "spillionaires."

"It's a double-edged sword," said Petrocelli, who expects revenue to jump 50 percent this year. "Nobody wanted this to happen — so many people are getting hurt — but on the flipside, there is an unbelievable amount of people who are now working thanks to this response effort."

### **Creating jobs**

More than 24,000 workers and volunteers have mobilized along the Gulf Coast to aid in the spill response, according to the Deepwater Horizon Unified Command, a consortium that includes BP and federal agencies overseeing the effort. BP alone has hired 4,500 formerly unemployed workers for security and cleanup. The rest are contractors, the group said.

With no end in sight to the crisis, it's hard to forecast the economic activity generated by contractors, said Loren Scott, a professor emeritus of economics at Louisiana State University. He added there is no way the response effort will make up for the loss of 20,000 tourism jobs this summer.

"But these companies will make a lot of money, to be sure," he said, noting the boom could last well after the cleanup is over due to beefed up regulation of the oil industry.

Petrocelli said Matrix's involvement is "serendipitous," since the 20-year-old company had been flirting with the idea of a spill unit just months before the April explosion aboard Deepwater Horizon. As plumes of oil escaped from the well, Matrix used its oil industry contacts to land a response job, secured a \$1.5 million line of credit from a bank and began hiring workers to send to the Gulf.

"At one point, I was getting a résumé every 15 seconds," said Petrocelli, of the two days he spent screening candidates, most of whom were biologists, engineers and other skilled workers.

The team fanned out across the Gulf Coast, with Evertsen and 25 others rescuing wildlife on Grand Isle, several more devising oil containment strategies in Mobile, Ala., and a few others building a marina deep in the Louisiana bayous, which will be used

as an outpost to deploy resources.

Matrix is also monitoring oil containment boom along the Louisiana coast — most of which were manufactured by another New Jersey firm called Sorbent Products Company.

### **In demand**

At SPC's sprawling Somerset warehouse, 118 staffers are working frenetically to keep up with demand for the floating barriers used to corral oil until it can be removed without substantial damage to the environment.

The firm ships 1,000 bales of boom each day to New Orleans, at prices ranging from \$130 to \$3,000 per bale, said operations manager Charles Petrone. The business, which for three decades has responded to such disasters as Exxon Valdez and the San Francisco Bay oil spill, has never been busier.

"Are we doing well? Sure," said Petrone, who hung pictures on the factory floor of oiled birds, stained beaches and other scenes of devastation from the Gulf. "But we never forget why we're doing this. Everyday we think about the lives of those people."

The Matrix team is even contributing to the local economy, renting a seven-bedroom beachfront house on Grand Isle that would otherwise lie vacant. The owner is Allen Lottinger, a fisherman and charter boat captain who is paid \$1,200 each day by BP to take workers out on the water.

"It's working out well for now," said Lottinger, 39, who earns a third of his yearly income from Grand Isle tourism. "But when the cleanup is over and they don't need me anymore, I still won't be able to fish."

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