

COASTAL Tension

In the struggle for fisheries resources, can North Carolina's commercial fishing culture survive?

WRITTEN BY JIM WILSON

Last summer, a North Carolina newspaper story depicted a scene that must play out hundreds of times each year. Two recreational anglers are sight-casting to tailing red drums when they see a couple of commercial fishermen setting a gill net at the entrance to a creek.

One sport fisherman remarks that most states on the Atlantic coast have banned the use of gill nets in estuaries. "North Carolina is behind the times when it comes to gill nets," he says.

"I don't think we should have any entanglement netting in the sounds at all," his companion responds.

That coastal vignette delineates a tension that exists between some members of the commercial and recreational sectors. The sport fisherman thinks the commercial man is pillaging the resource by netting. The commercial fisherman thinks the only reason the recreational guy complains about his use of nets is that the sport fisherman wants more fish for himself. Tempers have flared occasionally between commercial fishermen and recreational anglers in our state, resulting in claims of cut nets and slashed tires. Often the tension is restricted to grouching, grumbling or angry words at N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission (MFC) public meetings.

That animosity is a relatively new thing. A century ago, most people fished for sustenance or commerce, not sport. Over the past few decades, though, as leisure time and disposable income have increased, more people have fished purely for recreation.

Too, the population of the coast has changed. Between 1970 and 2000, the 20 coastal counties experienced a population increase of 62 percent overall, with Dare County, home to Nags Head and Hatteras, leading the way with a 328 percent climb. Add to that the millions of people who vacation in those counties, and it is easy to see why the sleepy little fishing towns that dot the landscape no longer slumber. Most of those new residents and visitors have little knowledge of commercial fishing or the men and women who scrape out their livings from the sea.

By the nature of his work, Britt Shackelford, a charter boat skipper who runs Doghouse Fishing out of Hatteras and Wanchese, earns his living from fishing, but he also deals with recreational fishermen on a daily basis. In 2005, Shackelford was one of the founders of North Carolina Watermen United, a trade association for people who make their livings off the water. Like other captains who take sport anglers out for a day on the water, Shackelford said he hears the complaints about commercial fishermen.



JOEL ARRINGTON



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This placid scene on Broad Creek in Pamlico County belies the tension that exists between beleaguered commercial fishermen and recreational anglers.

“We’ll be up on the bridge and they’ll see guys with nets and say, ‘That’s why we can’t catch more fish. Those commercial guys are catching too many.’ So I’ll talk to them about what the commercial guys are doing, show them the guy’s boat and gear when we get back to the dock, explain what’s going on. A lot of times, they end up wanting to buy some of his fish.”



NATE BACHELER

A Threatened Culture. Unfortunately, creating goodwill among those two user groups often is not so painless. The commercial fisherman in North Carolina, and every other part of the country, faces an increasingly difficult life. His existence, in fact, is threatened. He is intensely regulated by state and federal governments and faces competition from foreign markets, which provide much of America’s seafood. (Imports account for 75 to 80 percent of the seafood consumed annually in the United States.) Fish houses are disappearing, leaving the commercial fisherman with fewer options for selling his catch. Boat slips, too, are losing out to development and have become too expensive for any but the well-heeled to buy. In some places where growth has been the greatest, fishing families have a difficult time even paying property tax on their houses and land, particularly since the average ex-vessel receipts for a commercial fisherman in North Carolina were just \$18,736.85 in 2004. A fishing culture that has existed for centuries is under fire daily from an array of threats, with no relief in sight. In 2005, the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) counted 3,980 active commercial fishermen, who made 155,112 fishing trips with landings of 79,162,659 pounds, the lowest catch in state history. Just five years prior, 5,031 active commercial men made 259,746 trips and landed 154,229,116 pounds

of fish. Conversely, the estimated number of recreational anglers has grown from 1,921,780 in 2000 to 2,360,712 in 2005. Their total catch — approximately 22 million pounds — and trips — about 6.5 million — were nearly the same in 2000 as in 2005, although there have been fluctuations in the intervening years.

To the commercial fisherman, North Carolina’s new Coastal Recreational Fishing License (See “License to Manage,” Oct. 2006), which takes effect on Jan. 1, 2007, seems like another assault on his way of life. The commercial harvesters are wary of the license for several reasons.

Jerry Schill, the former president of the N.C. Fisheries Association, a nonprofit trade association created by commercial fishermen in 1952, was fighting the recreational license as long ago as 1993. That’s when Schill heard a spokesman for the Coastal Conservation Association (CCA) of North Carolina, a prominent sportfishing organization, tell a public forum in Raleigh that the license would give recreational fishermen a powerful voice.

“The way the license was presented was not for data; it was to create an avenue that the money could be used against the commercial fishing industry,” said Sean McKeon, who replaced Schill in June 2005, almost a year after the licensing bill was adopted.

“I think that the primary problem we had with the license was if it was ostensibly to collect data to better enable us to manage the resource, both recreational and commercial, then it should be all-inclusive and not have all the carve-outs, not have all those people not participating,” McKeon said. “Charter and head boats are carved out now; so are the piers. That really was the reason — and comments by others that it was going to be money used against the commercial fishermen. We were against it right up until the time it was passed. Reality being what it is, we didn’t make a big stink over it at the last. Everybody knew where we stood.”

Owners of charter boats and head boats can purchase a vessel license that eliminates the need for each fisherman on the boat to be licensed. Piers can purchase a blanket license, the cost of which is based on the number of linear feet of the pier. One of the benefits of the license for DMF is that the agency will have excellent data on the number of recreational anglers and the impacts they are having on fisheries.

Some commercial harvesters feared that because the license will produce a list of recreational anglers, that information could be accessed by groups opposed to commercial fishing. However, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, the agency that will sell the licenses, is forbidden by law from disclosing personal information, including an angler’s name, telephone number and address, to anyone except government agencies that have a need for the information.

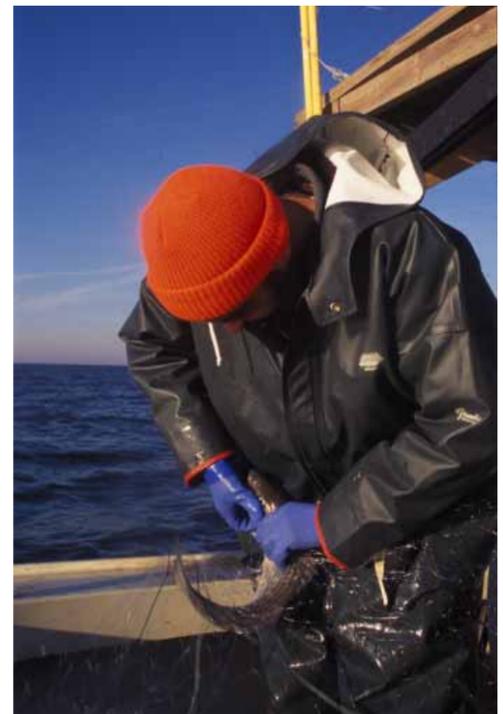


MELISSA MCGAW

The numbers game. Fisheries managers already know that recreational saltwater fishing, through the sheer numbers of participants, plays a larger economic role than commercial fishing. Exactly how great an economic impact those anglers have is unclear, and will remain so until the recreational license goes into effect. Estimates of recreational expenditures are many and vary wildly. Perhaps the safest estimate comes from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s 2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation. That survey showed close to 700,000 recreational saltwater anglers spent \$246,155,000 that year in North Carolina. For the year 1999, however, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration had estimated direct expenditures of \$622,641.

It should come as no surprise that all those recreational anglers also can have a big impact on fisheries. Sport fishermen have higher harvests than commercial fishermen on more than a dozen finfish species. Sometimes the harvest is dramatically higher, as in the case of striped bass, yellowfin tuna and dolphin. “We know that the impact is pretty great now,” said DMF director Preston Pate. “I think once we get that documentation, we’ll be able to convey not only the level of impact on the resource but also the level of contribution to the economy of the recreational fisherman much more clearly and accurately to the public.”

Even knowing the larger economic role of recreational fishing leaves hanging this question: Should



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For hundreds of years, families in eastern North Carolina have built their lives and communities around what they harvest from the sounds and ocean.

access to resources or allocation of fisheries be based on the economic vigor of one user group versus another?

Historically, economics usually wins. Most states with a recreational saltwater license — and that includes every state from Texas to Maryland on the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic coasts — have placed new restrictions on commercial fishing. Soon after instituting a saltwater license, Florida banned most commercial fishing nets through a ballot initiative. Texas, Louisiana, South Carolina and Georgia, among others also have some form of gill net ban. In the early 1980s, Texas, spurred by Exxon heir Walter Fondren III and the nascent CCA (then known as the Gulf Coast Conservation Association), passed legislation banning the commercial catch of red drum and spotted seatrout in its waters and forbidding the sale of either



NATE BACHELER

Commercial and recreational fishermen target many of the same species. For the various species of grouper, the two groups combined landed more than an estimated 900,000 pounds in 2005.

wild-caught species in the state. By the end of the 1980s, commercial fishing for red drum in all federal waters in the Gulf of Mexico ended.

Will North Carolina be any different in terms of further restrictions on commercial harvesters? Some recreational anglers would respond that we cannot have both a good recreational fishery and a good commercial fishery. “That’s a foolish statement,” McKeon said. “It’s based on the lowest common denominators of the human spirit, and they’re avarice and greed. I think for a man to insist that his pleasure take precedence over another man’s livelihood is very arrogant and a very foolish thing to say.”

If the commercial versus recreational situation plays out differently in North Carolina, it could be because of the Fisheries Reform Act of 1997.

Room for all? “What I’ve been explaining in the debate over the saltwater fishing license has been the legal requirement of the legislative mandate that we work under, and that’s the Fisheries Reform Act,” Pate said. “That very clearly says that the fishery resource will not be managed to the exclusion of one group or the other.”

The Fisheries Reform Act revamped fisheries management in North Carolina. One of the crucial pieces of that legislation was that DMF was directed to write Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) for all significant commercial and recreational species and to review those plans every five years. The act also acknowledged the importance of both commercial and sport fishing, and directed that DMF must consider both user groups in its management decisions.

“I have to answer these questions almost every time I make a presentation to a group that is primarily recreational anglers,” Pate said. “Why does North Carolina still allow shrimp trawling inside? Why does North Carolina still allow the use of gill nets inside? I explain that in the states where that gear has been banned, it has not been because of biological assessment of damage to the stock. It’s been caused by purely political reasons. In the state of Florida, there was enough political juice by the recreational anglers to get the commercial fishermen kicked out of certain aspects of that fishery. Texas was the same way.”

The imbalance of the numbers, of both fishermen and economics, scares the commercial sector, Pate said. “My response to their fear of that imbalance is that the recreational fishing license is not going to cause that imbalance; it’s there already. People, politicians, managers already know there are more recreational anglers than there are commercial fishermen. What you’ll have is a better accounting of them. There may be some reality or some legitimacy to their concern that those anglers, now that they are paying

for the privilege to fish, might demand a louder voice and more say in the management process. More than that, what they interpret is a cause-and-effect relationship between a recreational fishing license being approved in a state and shortly thereafter a ban on commercial fishing or certain components of commercial fishing.”

Pate noted that a plethora of gear restrictions for commercial fishermen already exist. They are not allowed to trawl for shrimp in areas that once were open; large-mesh gill nets are banned in Pamlico Sound because of sea turtles; bottom-disturbing gear is prohibited in areas of submerged aquatic vegetation and primary and secondary nursery areas; and flynets are banned south of Cape Hatteras. Last summer the MFC closed the Pamlico and Pungo rivers to shrimp trawling because of excessive bycatch mortality of juvenile Southern flounder. Those restrictions and more are in place without a saltwater license.

Fair and equitable treatment. McKeon said the Fisheries Reform Act has made it clear that both the commercial and recreational sectors have to work together. “I think the spirit of that act is that the sectors should be treated fairly,” he said. “At the end of the day, the bottom line of that act was: ‘Y’all are here, y’all are fishing side by side, you’re going to get along. This is what we’re going to put in place so you will get along. We’re going to facilitate the management of those fisheries to be fair and equitable.’ I think that particular reform act is the mechanism that says you’re going to get along whether you like it or not.”

Some recreational anglers do not like fishing side by side with commercial fishermen. Last summer, one North Carolina writer called for a net ban as the only way to ensure top-quality recreational fishing in our state, particularly for red drum. “He doesn’t care that there are hundreds and hundreds of families who would lose their jobs and go out of business,” McKeon said. “That’s not a concern of his. His concern is a thriving recreational fishing industry, which means fishing how and when and where he wants.



MELISSA MCGOW

Globalization of seafood markets strikes hard

One of the ironies of commercial fishing is that although the total United States harvest has remained static for 15 years, Americans are eating more seafood each year. Spurred by reports of the health value of seafood, our annual per capita consumption of fish and shellfish has risen to nearly 17 pounds. The bulk of that seafood, about 80 percent, is imported, primarily from Asia. Those imports give the United States a trade deficit of more than \$7 billion in that commodity.

Shrimp, imported from such countries as China, Thailand, Vietnam, India, Ecuador and Brazil, are America’s most popular seafood and constitute about 34 percent of the total United States imports. America imports about 1 billion pounds of shrimp each year just from those six nations, and we each consume 4.2 pounds of shrimp annually. Add salmon and crab, the other two most popular imports, and those three products account for about 54 percent of United States annual imports.

“The globalization of our economy and seafood industry is a real threat to the health of the commercial fishing industry, and it’s not just North Carolina,” said Preston Pate, director of the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF). “The low price of imported seafood products, including shrimp and crabmeat, and to a growing extent some of the farm-raised species such as flounder, that are coming onto the market is something our domestic wild harvesters cannot compete with.”

Between 2000 and 2004, Americans’ per capita consumption of seafood rose about 1.5 pounds. It was no coincidence that cheap imported shrimp and other seafood began appearing in American stores at the same time. The effects on the shrimp industry showed up quickly. In North Carolina, commercial fishermen landed 10.3 million pounds of shrimp worth \$25.5 million in 2000. Five years later, they caught only 2.4 million pounds, and the value fell to \$4.4 million. The U.S. International Trade Commission levied antidumping duties on the farm-raised shrimp of six nations (Thailand, China, Vietnam, India, Ecuador and Brazil) early in 2005 because those countries were selling shrimp below the price it cost to produce them. Nevertheless, the trend of increased imports from those countries has not abated. By last June, total United States shrimp imports were running 11 percent higher than in 2005.

Shrimp are considered an annual species. They reach maturity within a year, have high spawning and mortality rates, and few live beyond one year. In North Carolina, there are three primary species: brown shrimp, usually caught from July to November; pink shrimp, harvested from April to June; and white shrimp, caught from August to November. For decades, North Carolina fishermen have turned to shrimp to help put food on their families’ tables. Making money off shrimp, however, has become more difficult as the ex-vessel price, the price paid to the fishermen, has fallen. The 2005 average was \$1.87 per pound.

“We had one of the worst shrimp landings on record last year,” Pate said. “The recruitment was bad, but not as bad as the landings reflected. The landings were low because a lot of the traditional shrimpers were off New England and New Jersey scalloping. They could go up there and do their day trips and catch 10-dollars-a-pound scallops burning the same amount of fuel that they would to chug around Pamlico Sound and catch 50-cents-a-pound shrimp. If you can’t do the math on that, you ought to stay home.

“I think that’s a sign of the future. What that is perpetuating is that when the ability or the opportunity to harvest declines, you lose your infrastructure that supports the industry.”

Perhaps nowhere is the loss of that infrastructure more vivid than in our state’s crab-picking houses, which have declined from an all-time high of 43 facilities to just 12. “When the imported crabmeat hit the country 10 years ago, it had a devastating effect on our crab-picking houses in North Carolina,” Pate said. “Cheap labor and cheap product available to the foreign picking houses put product on the domestic market that there was just no way our domestic pickers could compete with.”

The harvest statistics for hard blue crabs, a staple of the North Carolina commercial industry, tell a story similar to that of shrimp. In 1996, fishermen harvested 65.6 million pounds of the shellfish. In 2005, the catch was only 23.6 million pounds. As the market for picked domestic crab meat atrophied, North Carolina fishermen responded by taking advantage of the increased value in live crabs, primarily the big males that are called basket crabs.

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2005 Recreational Harvest Greater Than Commercial

Species	Recreational Pounds	Commercial Pounds
Cobia	383,074	17,886
Dolphin	5,052,981	141,365
Red Drum	236,754	128,770
Black Drum	168,800	44,987
King Mackerel	1,296,726	1,246,092
Pigfish	146,672	30,015
Pompano	73,188	6,519
Spotted Seatrout	624,076	129,595
Sheepshead	207,221	53,259
Striped Bass	2,213,745	848,178
Yellowfin Tuna	5,510,876	708,736
Wahoo	464,884	14,980



JOEL ARRINGTON

Whether by head boat, on the beach or from an offshore charter, recreational anglers make substantial impacts on North Carolina's economy and its fish resources.

"Certainly most of our guys are recreational fishermen when they're not commercial fishing. There is an element that would like to see nothing more than the commercial man in North Carolina go out of business, and I think that's sad. I've never heard a commercial fisherman — and I've been in some pretty heated discussions with my colleagues behind closed doors — ever talk about putting recreational people out or not having recreational fisheries."

Will Morgan, executive director of CCA North Carolina, said there should be room for both user groups in North Carolina. "CCA has some extremists at either end of the spectrum," he said. "Fishermen are stubborn. Each of us thinks he knows the best way to do something."

"Ultimately, I hope we can have both a good recreational fishery and a good commercial fishery," he said. "We want what's best for the resource. We want whatever science tells us it needs. That can't do anything but help. If it affects one group more than the other, even if it's recreational fishermen, as long as it is good for the resource, then that's what CCA would support."

In an effort to get the two user groups talking to one another, commercial fishermen and recreational anglers are brought in on the ground floor when biologists prepare FMPs. Representatives of both groups serve on advisory committees that report to the MFC. "The way commercial and recreational issues have been addressed in the past gets to be an all-or-nothing situation," Morgan said. "All-or-nothing shouldn't always be the case."

Walter Fondren, who has called a recreational license "a weapon to level the playing field" with commercial fishermen, and McKeon, the commercial



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JOEL ARRINGTON

fishermen's representative, have a common view as to the most critical element in the struggle between the two fishing interests.

Politics hold key. "Capt. Will Etheridge said it better than anybody else: It comes down to the elected officials," McKeon said of the late Dare County fisherman. "We can complain about managers, NMFS (National Marine Fisheries Service), the commissions, the councils; but at the end of the day, unless the elected officials, both those in-state and our congressional delegation, take up this issue and put commercial fisheries on the agenda, on the radar screen, the future is dire. It's every bit as dire as it was in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and other places in the Gulf. The key is the elected officials have to understand that without their aid, their help and

commitment to the industry, the industry does not have a bright future. We have made some good progress in bringing some of these issues to our congressional delegation, particularly our senators."

Fondren, the chairman of CCA, has written very succinctly on the matter: "The real power in this battle is political."

As a manager, Pate, who will retire from DMF on Feb. 1, 2007, takes the words of the Fisheries Reform Act seriously. "We've approached the problem from this standpoint: If a user group is excluded, then we may have failed in our management approach as required of us by law. We want to keep habitat with enough integrity and the stocks healthy enough so that the traditional fisheries, both commercial and recreational, can be maintained. If it gets to the point where we have to exclude one user group from participating in the fishery, that's going to be a sad day for me as a fisheries manager, because I don't think we will have done a very good job by the time we get to that point."

After having served more than nine years as DMF director, Pate realizes that the strictures of that fisheries legislation are not immutable. "That's not to say that sometime in the future the political pressures might not become strong enough to make a change," he said. "And that's not to say that some time in the future we not might find legitimate biological reasons for completely eliminating some form of fishery. There are a lot of restrictions in place, and there are probably going to be more in the future that respond to the needs of the resource to help maintain the health of that resource, and not political needs."

In 1969, the Stratton Commission delivered a report on the state of our nation's seas, coasts and their resources to the U.S. Congress. That commission believed, erroneously, that seafood harvests would continue to grow as fishermen tapped new species with more sophisticated technologies. The report noted the following about commercial fishermen: "Fishing is an ancient business, and its practitioners often are less concerned with economic efficiency than with the simple fact of making a living from the sea."

Fishing is, indeed, an ancient business. Throughout history, men and women of countless cultures have fed themselves or earned their livings from the bounty they could harvest from the sea. In North Carolina, early European explorers found the Algonquians of the Coastal Plain very adept at fishing. The colonists also grew proficient at fishing, and began a proud, hard-working, community-based culture that has existed for more than 300 years. What remains to be seen now is how much longer that culture and tradition will continue. ♦

Jim Wilson is associate editor of WINC.

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The crabs are shipped to Baltimore, Boston and other cities along the Atlantic coast. Commercial harvesters also increased their catch of soft crabs.

That strategy, however, went awry late last summer. "What's happened now is that, with Hurricane Katrina destroying the crab-picking facilities in the Gulf [of Mexico], the live crabs that were being brought to those picking houses before the storm are now being trucked up to New England and Baltimore for the live-crab market," Pate said. "Chesapeake Bay is having a fairly decent year, so they're putting live crabs on the New England market. Our fishermen essentially don't have anywhere to send their crabs. So even if we were to have a banner year in recruitment and production of blue crabs, the market conditions are so bad that the fishermen are not going to fully benefit from the improved harvest. That just underscores the lingering, long-term effects imports can have on the infrastructure supporting a fishery."

American harvesters once supplied the bulk of shrimp consumed in this country, but now that percentage has dropped from approximately 90 percent to about 20 percent. With the number of commercial fishermen falling, few young people entering the profession and the loss of infrastructure throughout the industry, American fishermen simply cannot supply this nation's demand for seafood, 40 percent of which is supplied by aquaculture.

"There's no way, even without the imports, that the domestic harvest can satisfy the needs of the consumer for shrimp, so we're going to have to continue to rely on imports to meet those demands," Pate said. "What the fishermen are trying to do — some of them being successful in this — is develop niche markets, create a better awareness in the consuming public of the quality of the domestically harvested seafood, in flavor, in texture and in not being full of chemicals like farm-raised products are, so that it can continue to command a high and even higher price."

That is what is happening in Down East Carteret County right now. A number of disparate groups started a program called Carteret Catch to promote seafood caught by local fishermen. Carteret Catch had its origins as part of the Rural Community College Initiative, a program funded by the Ford Foundation that helps rural communities become competitive in changing economies.

Carteret Catch has brought together not only commercial fishermen and seafood dealers but also N.C. Sea Grant, the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center, DMF, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and academic institutions such as N.C. State University, Carteret Community College and N.C. A&T University. One of the aims of the program is to inform the public that commercial fishing in North Carolina produces a high-quality, sustainable product.

"Studies have shown time and again that people want to support local products," said Pam Morris of the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum. "Give them the option and they will support local people and quality seafood."

Morris said Carteret Catch does not want restaurants to serve only local seafood but to emphasize the local catch as different, another option on the menu. "Even if we wanted to have everybody in Carteret County eat nothing but local seafood, we couldn't do it. We can't catch that much shrimp."

The program is more about finding a niche that local fishermen can fill. "It's going to take thought and will," said Morris, whose husband is a commercial fisherman. "It's a problem you can't just throw money at. Like other places, we're in danger of losing our fishing industry. We're on the point of a knife really."

"The general idea is that we can't survive in a global market. Commercial fishing has to start selling itself differently. I believe we'd receive an F on the education of the public as to local seafood. We would like to develop partnerships between fish houses, restaurants and fishermen. We want to help fishermen remain viable economically. Right now we still have a living culture, but you can't keep heritage going without economics."

Several factors have come together to make commercial fishermen's lives harder than normal and accentuate the need for a program like Carteret Catch. The ex-vessel price of shrimp is low — about \$2 a pound for the large 16 to 20 count shrimp last summer, less for smaller shrimp — the cost of diesel fuel is high — about \$2.50 per gallon — and the lingering effects of a series of devastating hurricanes has hurt shrimp populations.

"All of it together is equaling to a hard time," Morris said.

—Jim Wilson