

# FISHERMEN'S NEWS

*The Advocate for the Commercial Fisherman*



## Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations

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### Engaging the Next Generation of Fisheries Stakeholders

BY TIM SLOANE

EARLIER THIS YEAR I SPENT A month on the road visiting several of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations' (PCFFA) member ports in California. I had the opportunity to visit with a wide variety of fishermen, and I learned that individual members of the fleet's age, fisheries, gear types and attitudes are about as diverse as there are fish in the sea. But despite those differences, there were three common problems that nearly every fisherman voiced with some level of concern:

1. How can I get more fish in the water?
2. How can I solidify my access to fish in the water?
3. Who is going to make sure others can get those fish when I'm gone?

This column is typically dedicated to answering the first two of those questions, so we thought we'd depart from our usual tack this month and have a think about engaging the next generation of fisheries stakeholders. It's a problem that defies an easy answer, but it's a question that the industry had better answer before there isn't anyone left to steward the resource.

#### What is a "Stakeholder?"

Before diving into the problem, it's important to point out that there are two different types of fishing stakeholders. There are those that I'd refer to as "passive stakeholders," meaning those that do not engage in shaping and improving that stake that they hold; and there are "active stakeholders" that use their own resources to try to improve their situation.

As a fisherman participating in a managed fishery, you – by definition – have skin in the management game. The question is whether you're doing anything about it.

Passive stakeholders are certainly impacted by the status quo in a fishery, whether the status quo is good or bad. A

passive stakeholder just doesn't engage in reshaping the status quo to better serve his or her desires. It's really easy to be a passive stakeholder, and for that reason, there are a lot of them. Seafood consumers who simply buy the fish they want regardless of the retail price are passive stakeholders. So are hardcore environmental activists who complain about fishing impacts without offering practical solutions to the appropriate managers. And so are fishermen who simply accept a tiny quota or a low stock assessment without thinking about how they might change that reality.

On the other hand, active stakeholders are willing to use their own resources in order to make the changes they want to see in a fishery. Those resources could take any number of forms: time, energy, thought, money, influence, presence and communications are all tools that a stakeholder can use to shape the future. They don't have to be employed at once, or at any particular level of intensity. But using these resources is a step beyond simply complaining to like-minded individuals about the status quo. It's doing something – anything – that moves the needle toward a positive change.

#### Managing Fish is Managing People

At both the state and federal levels, fisheries management depends on stakeholder input to identify management priorities, shape management measures, and keep the managing bodies in line (via the threat of litigation, if managers overstep their bounds). Fishing industry input is, by law, a critical part of the management equation.

This is a manpower game. It takes awareness of problems, and an understanding of the process, and a willingness to voice concerns to remedy those problems. Awareness, processing and vocalization require human beings.

But manpower representing fishermen is declining. Fishing effort is consolidating, and attrition is accelerating as fishing opportunity declines and the fleet ages. Organizational



structures such as marketing associations that once supported fishermen are less capable of providing representation, and resources to fund representatives are in short supply.

These problems are trouble for the small-to-medium sized, mom-and-pop fishing fleet. That fleet is dispersed and harder to organize than smaller consortiums of better-capitalized larger vessels, processors or environmental NGOs that don't always share the same interests as the small-to-medium boat fleet. Simply put, it is harder for the sector with the majority of vessels to compete with everybody else.

### Barriers to Entry

There are a lot of very good and valid reasons why fishermen can't get engaged in any one particular management event. Foremost is fishing: you're necessarily away from the happenings when they're happening. But there are others.

Management processes aren't easy to just jump into. In order to make an impact on the proceedings, it's important to understand their context. This requires a general background understanding of the biological and physical sciences; some exposure to the specific scientific setting at hand; a familiarity with the relative costs and benefits of each of the management options that might apply to the situation; and an understanding of when and how to exert pressure or provide input so as to move the needle your direction. That's a lot to ask of someone whose job makes it impossible to schedule nine straight days of meetings five times a year (as in the case of the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC)), plus the time it takes to familiarize oneself with the issues and to try to gather some support from similarly situated fishermen. This is even harder for crewmembers, who have to defer to skippers in timing their participation in management proceedings.

There can be psychological barriers to entry, too, perhaps stemming from the belief that even passionate participation on an issue will not change any minds. In California, the hook and line and fixed gear fleets have suffered the most from the imposition of catch shares in the West Coast groundfish fishery. Many in that fleet saw the writing on the wall when the program started moving and started mobilizing. But despite a lot of time and effort, catch shares came to pass. And as the hook and line groundfish fleet has dwindled since catch shares came into effect, even the most ardent pleas feel like they fall on deaf ears. Against that sort of backdrop, there is burnout among the fishermen that did their best to better shape that outcome, and a precautionary tale for those who weren't around to see it happen.

There are personal barriers, too. Kids. A spouse who is angry enough about the amount of time spent on the water. A lack of interest in the substances of management deliberations. A feeling that you won't understand the process or the materials, or don't have access to resources that will enable you to participate. All are very good reasons for not participating. But do they really counterbalance the reason for getting involved?

### Why Me?

That reason is because you have more to offer than anyone else about where you want your future to go. It's kind of obvious – but if you don't speak up, you'll never be heard.

Put another way, if you're not at the table, you're going to be on the menu. When your voice isn't part of the management equation, all the other voices are going to divvy up what piece of the fish pie you might have been able to secure for yourself.

Fishing is a business, period. Management is a part of fishing. It's important to recognize that getting involved in fisheries management is now, maybe sadly, a part of doing your job. And a big part.

The PFMC meets for 45 days out of the year. That's about 10 to 15 percent of the year. With state management happening in parallel, you might be directing an equivalent amount of your effort to making sure things are headed in the right direction. PCFFA proposed this in the past: Captain Chuck Cappotto (Ret.) suggested putting about 20% of your working time into the management side of the job. See *Fishermen's News*, September 2014 at <http://pcffa.org/fishermens-news-articles/fishermens-news-september-2014/>. He called it "really a small price to pay for a profession that has given us such freedom and beauty."

For younger fishermen and new entrants who are at the beginnings of their careers, this is an especially important point. If you're relatively new to the business, you're inheriting a system that right now is not set up to make it easy for the little guy. You'd do well to incorporate some attention to management from the get-go, to learn incrementally and to have good habits and connections for when you really need them.

The question remains, though, as to whether it makes sense for each individual fisherman to devote 20% of his or her time to showing up at meetings when the barriers, and the opportunity costs, are as high as they are. Fortunately, there is another way.

### What You Have to Offer

As I mentioned earlier in this article, an active stakeholder has an array of different resources at hand to engage in the stakeholder aspects of fisheries management. The point of listing off those different resources was to suggest that you don't have to show up at a meeting or get in touch with a politician to start pushing the change you like to see in your fishery.

Instead, I propose that you take a moment to think about what "moving the needle" really means. Sure, it's the Council and state and federal politicians and agencies that ultimately make decisions. But you can influence those decisions by influencing others around you.

Think about it. The more stakeholder that are aware of a problem, the more likely one of those might be to step up and lead the charge to fix that problem. With a greater base of support, that person has potentially more resources to push for change, and a better chance of convincing others that change



is important. Each level of this process requires a personal decision to make an affirmative step. Share information. Debate with your slipmates. Donate money. Make T-shirts. Contribute to a website. Rally your friends. Research. Explain it to your crew. Get in touch with your local association. Host a fundraiser. Hire a representative. Try to understand. Offer your insight. Ask how you can help. These are the affirmative steps that it takes to initiate big change, and these are all things you can do to make the jump from a passive to an active fisheries stakeholder.

And of course, there's always the opportunity to actually step up and make it to a Department of Fish and Game or Council meeting. You can volunteer for a little-known task force, or run for office. You can step up as an officer for your local association. You're always welcome to get involved with PCFFA.

The next generation of fisheries stakeholders will have more opportunities to contribute than their predecessors. The Internet has opened huge opportunities to organize and vocalize, and it's going to be a powerful tool going forward. But regardless of the tools you use to get involved, it all starts with a choice.

You have the choice to not sit idly by while the entrenched interests and hangers-on steal away your fishing opportunity. But it's a choice you'd better make before it's too late. **FN**

*Tim Sloane is the Executive Director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations (PCFFA) and its sister organization, the Institute for Fisheries Resources (IFR). He can be reached at the joint PCFFA/IFR Office in San Francisco at PO Box 29370, SF, CA 94129-0370, (415)561-5080 or by email to: [tsloane@ififish.org](mailto:tsloane@ififish.org).*