

FISHERMEN'S NEWS

The Advocate for the Commercial Fisherman



Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations

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Into the Sunset: Moving on from PCFFA

By Tim Sloane

As with the ocean and all things, the organization behind this column works in cycles. Sometimes the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations (PCFFA) is heavy into salmon advocacy, and every other fishery is on the back burner. Sometimes we're struggling to keep the lights on, and other times we've got some financial breathing room. Sometimes our Executive Director lasts for forty years; sometimes it's a quicker turnaround.

I'm excited and a little wistful to announce that by the time this column is published, I'll have stepped down from the helm of PCFFA. All good things must come to an end, and for me it is an end that may have come just a little too soon. But you go where the fish are biting. For me, that bite is a new opportunity that I just can't pass up.

Changing Tides

Most readers of this column are familiar with PCFFA's previous Executive Director, the inimitable Zeke Grader. From just about its formation in 1976, Zeke steered PCFFA with a fiery passion and a deeply held belief that the fishing community was worth fighting for. He fought hard for that belief right up until his untimely death in 2015. During his tenure, Zeke's style was contentious and disruptive, but there's no denying that it was effective. As we wrote in this column after his passing, many fishermen will tell you that they wouldn't be fishing for salmon today were it not for Zeke Grader.

I'd like to think that my legacy, short time as I may have had to develop it, is that there is still a PCFFA today. Whenever any organization, especially a nonprofit organization with a limited budget and a finite constituency, loses its founding director, tough times follow.

When we lost Zeke, there was serious concern that the Federation might go down with him. Think about it: forty years of one guy carrying the load, one guy defining how things were done and when they get done, and one guy to decide who

to bother, negotiate or bully into making that thing happen. When we lost Zeke, we lost his knowledge of the organization and his many personal connections with the decision-makers that often hold the industry's fate in their hands.

To make things worse, I came on at an incredibly trying time for PCFFA's members, especially those in California where our headquarters are located. 2015 gave us a historically ugly salmon season on the West Coast magnified by the catastrophic loss of 95 percent of naturally spawned juveniles on the mainstem Sacramento River. Then, for the first time ever, the Dungeness crab fishery went down to domoic acid, and the fleet felt like they might never get back on the water. And then an even worse salmon season in 2016, with more restrictions probably on the way. Not an easy time to be a green Executive Director who had to learn on his feet.

Working in Solidarity

But we pulled through. Together with the incredible PCFFA Board of Directors and the dozens of fishermen who have stepped up to help, we proved that PCFFA can continue to be a voice for the future of fishing, no matter who is at the helm. I credit that to the fact that PCFFA is by the fleet and for the fleet. It's a bottom-up organization that addresses the issues of most concern to those who make their living on the ocean. It's not a top-heavy NGO monolith that uses its members only for fundraising – instead, if everything is working properly, PCFFA members can direct what issues staff tackle and how much time they devote to them, and raise the flag if something new and onerous pops up.

There's a responsibility on both ends that comes with an organization of this type. On the staff side, we of course need to advocate zealously and diligently for the fleet. We also need to communicate with as many members of the fleet as possible, and on a regular basis, to ensure that information is traveling in both directions. We likewise need to do what it takes to make



sure that information, which might be the interpretation of a bill, a proposal for an offshore project, a funding opportunity, or something else entirely, is useful for fishermen so they can direct us how to act.

On the fleet side, the responsibility is to be the boss: do your best to understand the issues and get involved in directing staff how to deal with them. Require accountability, transparency and opportunities to be involved. And help out with keeping the lights on, if having an organization that advocates on your behalf is something that's important to you.

On Keeping the Lights On

I'm going to make an aside here on that last point. If you're a fisherman, the question of whether an organization like PCFFA, or ALFA or WFBOA or WFPA or your local marketing associations are important to you is personal. I would not presume to know whether an individual fisherman sees value in PCFFA or not. But I think it's important to recognize that the policy work those organizations engage in has become part of being in the fishing industry. It is one of the most heavily regulated industries in the U.S., and if you're not paying attention to the policy/regulation side of things, you're going to get burned.

Organizations like PCFFA exist so that you can concentrate on fishing while staff does the leg work of showing up at meetings, reading legal and environmental documents, and getting in front of the TV cameras. That work takes money. We discussed the many ways you can get involved in your representative organizations a couple months back (*Fishermen's News* October 2016, available at www.pcffa.org/fn-archive). Potentially the most important way is by contributing financially to the cause.

Think about it this way: whenever you pay taxes to the government, you're paying to support the processes that allow our opponents to fight against your fishing opportunity or to work to destroy your fish resources. Whenever you make a tax-deductible contribution to the fishing industry advocacy group that you believe in, however, you are reducing the amount of taxes you pay and you are funding the folks that fight for the survival of fishing as a sustainable way to make a living. It's a no brainer: pay into your advocacy organization, and the organization can do a better job of protecting you. Nothing in life is free.

Charting the Course

As of this writing, we are conducting a search for PCFFA's next Executive Director. I'm excited about the candidates that have applied up to this point. They represent a broad range of experience and skills, and any of them would bring that zealous spirit required to represent an organization like PCFFA. By the time this issue is published, that new Executive

Director will hopefully have been seated and started working on an article introducing themselves to the fishing community. This is an exciting time.

Some advice to the next person who takes this job. First, this is a complicated job that requires wearing a lot of hats: salmon, crab, halibut, groundfish, local, state, federal, MSA, ESA, CWA, Antiquities Act, policy, administrative, financial, organizational, regulatory, legislative, legal, climate change, drought, ocean acidification, domoic acid and more. You might go off the deep end if you try to stack them on all at once. The best way to see how the hats all fit together on the head is to get down to the harbor and meet some of your constituents. Talk to them, get to know them, and figure out how they've made it this far without falling off – that same spirit of defiance, perseverance and solidarity the defines the West Coast fishing community is what's going to keep the Federation going for years into the future.

Second, never forget that the fishermen and women I just told you to learn from are also your boss. You have to earn their respect to be effective. You have to keep them updated even if your issue is at an impasse. You have to seek their advice because they know their business better than you, and it's ultimately their business that you're there to protect. Never discount the ideas and information your fleet gives you, because they are the reason for the whole thing in the first place.

Lastly, this job has a bottom line. It's a phrase that PCFFA Board President Dave Bitts put on the job description handed to me when I applied a couple of years back, and it's certainly modeled after Zeke's entire career. It defines the nature of the job and the way to carry oneself in all situations. It's a mantra and an ethos, and I think it summarily defines what it means to work on behalf the fishing industry that is struggling through uncertain times. If you do nothing else, do this: **Speak truth to power, and never make a deal that is bad for the fish.**

I wish the best of luck to the new Executive Director, to PCFFA, and to the hundreds of men and women that are fighting through a difficult time to be in the fishing industry. Like PCFFA, the ocean is on a cycle, and I hope it swings your way in the near future. 

Tim Sloane is the outgoing Executive Director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations (PCFFA) and its sister organization, the Institute for Fisheries Resources (IFR). Having spent two years helping to transition from Zeke Grader's leadership, he is moving on to champion environmental issues at a law firm in San Francisco. Contact the joint PCFFA/IFR office if you would like to connect with him, PO Box 29370, San Francisco, CA 94129, or email PCFFA/IFR Northwest Regional Director Glen Spain at fish1lifr@aol.com.