

FISHERMEN'S NEWS

The Advocate for the Commercial Fisherman



Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations

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Independence Requires Organization

By Zeke Grader

FOR MANY YEARS THE MASTHEAD of *Fishermen's News* read "The Advocate for the Independent Fisherman." While that has changed now to "The Advocate for the Commercial Fisherman," the notion of the independent fisherman, self-reliant and answerable only to the forces of nature, is an image many of us have held onto and what most fishermen strive for in one way or another.

Probably in no time since large fishing companies controlled our fisheries in the late 19th and early 20th century – arguably in Alaska through the 1960's – has the independence of fishing men and women been under more of a threat. Yes, there are onerous government regulations that go far beyond what's necessary to ensure sustainable fishing, safety at sea or ocean health (e.g., gathering of non-catch information). Far more insidious, however, is the government push, aided and abetted by at least one major NGO and its foundation/corporate sponsors, toward individual fishing quotas or catch shares.

IFQs, or some catch share variant, do not have to threaten the independence of fishermen; unfortunately, however, the way these programs are currently crafted (North Pacific halibut and blackcod may be the exception) they pave the way for third party, non-fishing ownership of share or quota eventually

relegating once independent fishermen to ocean sharecroppers stuck paying 25 percent or more of their earnings to non-fishing quota owners.

Even if post catch share generation fishermen own their own quota, the cost of entry could leave them beholden to lenders, not much different from today's college graduates faced with huge student loan debts – so much for independence.

If fishing men and women hope to remain, or be, independent they need to be organized. That may seem an oxymoron, but if you look back in history, it has been organization that has made for independent fishermen. Getting a fair price for fish came about through collective bargaining – facilitated by the agricultural marketing acts of the 1930's (allowing formation of fishermen's marketing associations) – or through the establishment of cooperatives.

And it not just the price of fish. Through organization, fishermen have successfully fought to preserve the fish they depend upon. Consider who has led the fight to preserve salmon runs in Alaska, on the Columbia, and in the Central Valley. It was organization that made for independent fishermen operators – having stocks to harvest and getting a fair price for the catch.

In this column last month, Chuck

Cappotto reminded us of other successes fishermen have had as a result of being organized – stopping a coastal nuclear power plant, helping stop offshore oil drilling north of the Santa Barbara Channel, working for modern commercial fishing marinas and port infrastructure and, most recently, initiating development of community fishing associations.

If You're Going to be in the Boat, You Have to Row

Captain Cappotto emphasized, as well, the need for each fisherman to give back to the industry with his "20/10" rule. Commercial fishing men and women, no matter how strongly they assert their independence, cannot shirk their responsibility to the fishery. As we know, with rights comes responsibility.

Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan in their 2012 campaign described the world in terms of "makers and takers." The concept was sound, but their description of the two was off. Congressman Ryan, in a recent NPR interview, said he realized that fact when a constituent confronted him, asking if he considered a veteran returning from Iraq or Afghanistan needing medical treatment, or a school teacher who dutifully paid her taxes all of her working years and now needed Medicare to help with health care, "takers." Ryan said he had to admit they were not.



Likewise the case can be made that those “job creators,” whom Romney told were among the “makers,” have proven too often to be “takers” when they receive unfair tax breaks or massive subsidies, ship American jobs overseas or even relocate their headquarters overseas to avoid paying taxes, leaving the rest of us to shoulder the load paying for military, health and education costs, and maintaining our roads and ports.

Arguably, in fact, the biggest “welfare queens” on the West Coast are the large agricultural growers on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley (although some live in Beverly Hills), who bought cheap desert land and then helped themselves to taxpayer subsidized water – essentially stolen from other parts of the state, much of which had supported salmon runs – to plant water-intensive crops such as almonds, or profit from the sale of water they don’t use. These same welfare queens are now trying to do away with fish protections, giving growers unfettered access to all the water they want despite a drought and severe water shortages elsewhere.

But while their definition of who are the “makers and takers” was wrong, the concept of “makers and takers” is spot on. If fishermen hope to be independent they have to be “makers” in the truest sense of the word, and that means organizing. If individuals think all they have to do is catch a lot of fish (or profit by selling their quotas to non-fishermen), and do nothing else, then they are the “takers” and threaten the independence of all fishermen.

Organizing 101

The act of organizing is fairly straightforward and the process itself should never be seen as an impediment to action. First off, there are in existence – some for more than a century – numerous local or regional fishing organizations that are effective, or could be made effective with an infusion of new energy.

Some, to name a couple of California examples, such as the Humboldt Fishermen’s Marketing Association or Fishermen’s Marketing Association of Bodega Bay have been active throughout the years advocating for their mem-

bers on everything from price to port facilities.

Others had been moribund until some infusion of new blood – in the case of Crab Boat Owner’s Association of San Francisco it came some 20 years ago from Bob Miller and Larry “Duck” Collins, addressing issues from ice facilities for the port to creation of the San Francisco Community Fishing Association.

Think where albacore fishermen would be if it were not for Western Fishboat Owners Association (WFOA) and its science counterpart the American Fishermen’s Research Foundation (AFRF).

Associations can represent specific fisheries or diverse fisheries, from large operations (e.g., Alaska Bering Sea Crabbers) to small vessel operators (e.g., Small Boat Commercial Salmon Fishermen’s Association). If you’re not already an association member, there should be an association open to you.

If there is not a fishermen’s organization in your port or region, or at least one that is active and willing to take on the variety of issues confronting our fisheries, it is not that difficult for groups of fishermen to put together an organization. Publications, such as those from Nolo Press can provide a layman’s guide to incorporation of an organization, if there are not attorney’s available and capable of handling the legal work quickly, competently, and for a reasonable fee.

Likewise, unless you’re planning a cooperative, most associations qualify for non-profit status under the tax code, in one of the §501(c) sections. If you run into a problem, call one of the other organizations along the coast, as most (certainly here at PCFFA) will be glad to give advice on organizing.

Having a Credible Message

Something that should be self-evident is that no matter how well organized a group of fishermen may be, you won’t go far if you don’t have a credible message. We say this because we’ve watched fishermen’s groups elsewhere flounder when they just weren’t credible. One example from years ago

was when the American Tunaboat Association complained of having to take onboard female observers. Mind you these were on vessels over 200 feet, that even had chapels on board. At the same time, 50 foot albacore boats, some without any staterooms, had no problems taking women science observers aboard (some preferred them because they were cleaner). ATA came out looking like total fools on that issue.

More recently, fishing groups – mainly on the Atlantic seaboard and in the Gulf – complaining of regulations intended to stop overfishing and begin rebuilding stocks, have found little sympathy for overfishing with the general public. Where they have had any credibility at all, has been in challenging the way the government science was conducted, where there was evidence of incompetence. That, or making a case for economic hardship due to the regulations, to open the door for disaster relief to assist individuals through the period of cutbacks or closures.

The most important thing about messaging is to always consider how the general public, or those you’re trying to convince, will receive it. It doesn’t matter how many huzzahs you get from your friends at the coffee shop or in the bar about what you have to say, it’s ultimately the court of public opinion that will determine whether you’re successful or not.

Coalescing

Another part of successful organizing is looking for others that share your concerns on a particular issue. These can even be groups you may oppose on other issues, as long as you can work together on that which you agree. At PCFFA we’ve often found ourselves in successful coalitions on matters of fish protection with progressive recreational fishing groups and tribes. These were issues neither we, nor they, could address successfully alone.

We’ve also had a long history of working with environmental organizations where we’ve shared a common interest. Some of those groups have proven to be excellent allies, while others are mainly “environment” in name only, little more than corporate greenwashers.



The Marine Fish Conservation Network has proven highly advantageous to us as both a forum to bring the concerns of commercial fishing to conservation and sportfishing groups, but also as allies working to improve the Magnuson-Stevens Act. The coalitions PCFFA has been part of are not just with conservation or other fishing groups either; we've worked with consumer groups (e.g., Food & Water Watch, Center for Food Safety) and family farm organizations, and in one instance, at least, with a major water agency.

Beware of Greens Bearing Gifts

Finally, one last note on organizing, and about fishermen's potential loss of independence from wrongly crafted IFQ or catch share programs: beware of some environmental organizations – mostly a handful of national or multi-national "Big Green" NGOs engaged in marine "conservation."

At PCFFA we've learned pretty much who are the good allies and who

are the pariahs. We flatly won't work with the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) with its ideologically-driven "market-based" solutions for conservation. EDF has not only pushed "water marketing" and "catch shares" to privatize public resources, but it has sought to bring Wall Street investors into our fisheries. Wall Street, with its increasing interest in food production, given concerns for food security due to climate change and population growth, is not looking to infuse capital into farming and fishing communities, but to take capital out. No thanks EDF. There are also at least four other Big Green groups we keep at arms-length as a result of their ties to large corporations (or their tightly held foundations) who would readily compromise our fish stocks and sell-out fishermen.

On the other hand, one of the "Big Green" groups, despite some programs with which we disagree, that has been excellent to work with on water, toxics and Pebble Mine is the Natural Resour-

ces Defense Council (NRDC). And while we may have qualms with Earthjustice on some of their Hawaiian work, they've been indispensable to us in defending salmon runs. Even the much-maligned Pew Environmental Trust has been a good ally on salmon, forage fish, and the MSA.

Many of the smaller and regional or local conservation groups have also proven to be great allies and good friends of fishing communities. Just remember, these groups are no more a monolith than commercial fishing is. There are good ones and bad ones.

For us the term "independent fisherman" and "commercial fisherman" are synonymous, or should be. Let's keep it that way. 🐟

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