

Fishing for the Future

An Interactive Panel Discussion
March 11, 2020
Pontchartrain Center, Kenner, LA

Overview

The commercial fishing industry in Louisiana has experienced changes within its demographics. Specifically, issues include aging of the fleet, (i.e., an increase in the average age of fishing vessels over time) and the graying of the fleet (i.e., an increase over time in the average age of fishing workers). While not unique to Louisiana, these changes must be addressed in order to maintain the economic viability of the commercial fishing industry into the future.

The graying of the fleet was the subject of an interactive session held at the Louisiana Fisheries Forward Summit (LFF) March 11, 2020 at the Pontchartrain Center in Kenner, LA. The session, entitled “Fishing for the Future,” was a moderated panel discussion in which representatives of the fishing industry discussed challenges and potential solutions to sustain the economic viability of the commercial fishing industry. The session focused primarily on socioeconomic considerations including changing human capital dynamics in the fishing and seafood industries.

The target audience was summit attendees working in Louisiana fisheries-dependent businesses including commercial fishermen¹, seafood docks and dealers, processors, retailers and charter operations. Audience input to the panel was collected in real-time throughout the session with active respondents providing input to 15 questions via electronic polling devices. This report summarizes the Background, Rationale, Format, Methods and Results of that session.

Background and Rationale

Through the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) trip ticket program, data shows that the average age of commercial fishing license holders has increased over the past decade. This graying of the fleet phenomena is a concern for the commercial fishing industry across the United States, but is especially prominent in Louisiana. Louisiana is the largest and most productive seafood industry in the lower 48 states. On average Louisiana catches 1 billion pounds of seafood annually, with an estimated dockside value of \$300 million. In developing the questions for the moderated discussion, we spoke with Sunny Rice of Alaska Sea Grant. Sunny explained, “The issue of graying of the fleet is not unique to Louisiana. The Alaska Young Fishermen Summit was created because young fishermen need to learn to advocate for themselves as well as provide effective training. The summit focuses on 5 areas: basic business training, fishermen the global market, science behind fishery management, the regulatory process; and networking” (Commercial Fisheries Workforce Advisory Meeting, Nov 11, 2019).

¹ Here the term “Fishermen” is gender-neutral as used by the fishing industry in the region.

LDWF trip ticket program data highlights the changes in the average age of commercial fishing license holders over the past decade (Table 1). The increase in the median age of fishermen coincides with a decrease in commercial fishing license over the past 30 years (Figure 1). Together these highlight a slow decline of the labor and capital invested in the Louisiana commercial fishing industry. In order to sustain the vibrant commercial fishing industry in Louisiana, efforts to address the challenges and potential solutions are needed.

Table 1. The typical age (median age) of commercial license holders. Source: J. Isaacs, LDWF (2020).

	Typical Age in 2000	Typical Age in 2018
Shrimp	43	54
Oyster	39	~45
Crab	40	50
Wild Crawfish	42	52

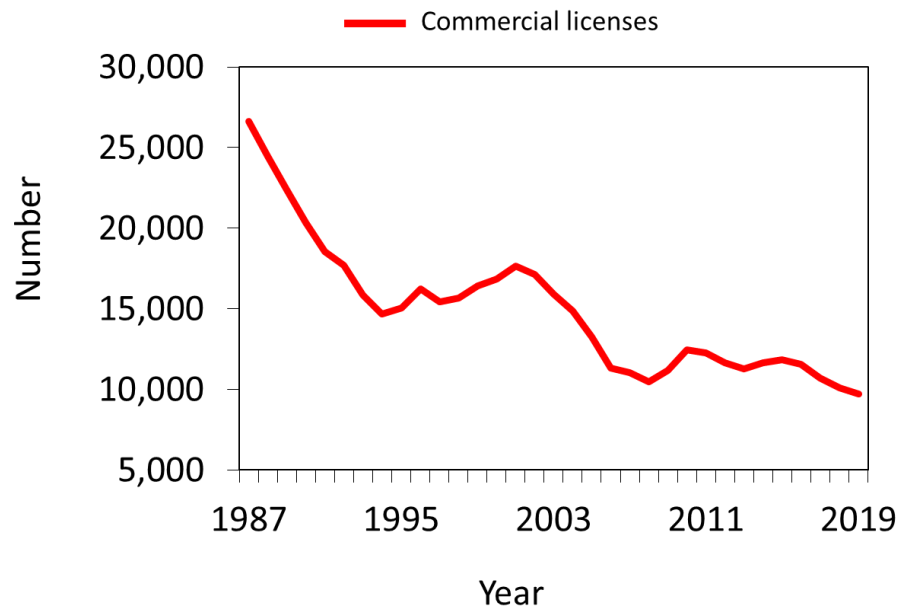


Figure 1. Number of annual commercial fishing licenses sold in Louisiana. Source: J. Isaacs, LDWF (2020).

Panel Format

The 2020 Louisiana Fisheries Forward Summit (LFF) was held on March 11 at the Pontchartrain Convention Center in Kenner, LA. The event attracted approximately 450 attendees and featured 65 vendors and displays covering a variety of topics related to the technology, regulation, marketing and processing of commercial fishery products. As part of the Summit, an afternoon

moderated discussion session entitled, “Fishing for the Future,” was scheduled to allow commercial fishermen, dock workers, seafood processors and retailers, and charters captains to weigh-in on labor and workforce issues that potentially affect the graying commercial fishing industry in coastal Louisiana. The session consisted of an invited panel of industry and agency leaders (Table 2). The panel was seated in front of an industry audience that responded to a series of questions developed by Louisiana Sea Grant (LSG) personnel. Polling of the audience was conducted using Turning-Point software (clickers) with results shown on screen in real time followed by facilitated panel discussions of the observed results. Around 100 people attended the session and 78 individuals participated in the audience polling. Polling devices were distributed only to attendees involved in Louisiana fisheries or seafood related businesses. The moderators and discussion panelist were as follows:

Panel Moderators:

Nicole Lundberg Assistant Marine Extension Agent, Lafourche and Terrebonne, LSU AgCenter and Louisiana Sea Grant
Earl Melancon Fisheries Professor Emeritus, Nicholls State University and Louisiana Sea Grant Fellow

Panelists Representing Industry:

Andy Bui Shrimp Buyer, Vermillion Gulf Seafood
Chalin Delaune Processor (owner), Tommy’s Seafood
Rodney Oleander Commercial fisherman, member of Louisiana Shrimp Task Force (LSTF)
Angela Portier Processor (owner), Faith Family Shrimp Company
Steven Voisin Commercial Oysterman (owner), Motivait Seafood

Panelists Representing Management and Sea Grant:

Patrick Banks Assistant Secretary, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries
Julie Lively Fisheries Specialist, LSU AgCenter and Louisiana Sea Grant

Videographer:

Roy Kron Director of Outreach and Communications, Louisiana Sea Grant

Program Coordinator:

Rex Caffey Director of Marine Extension and Professor of Economics, LSU AgCenter and Louisiana Sea Grant

Polling Questions and Results

The session lasted approximately 90 minutes during which fifteen key questions were administered. These questions assessed general aspects of demographics (profession, commodity, and region), insights on economic stress, new startups and aging trends, information about labor origins, recruitment and business succession, preferences for governmental assistance and business innovation, and strategies for workforce development. The following section details the audience responses by question. The number in parentheses (n=XX)

represents the number of individuals who responded with clickers to the question. Note some have more responses than number of individuals as they could select all that apply.

1. How old are you?
(Choose one answer)

<u>Category</u>	<u>% of responses (n=55 respondents)</u>
Under 30 years	6
31-44 years	26
45-59 years	44
Over 60 years	26

2. Why did you come to the Louisiana Fisheries Forward Summit?
(Select all that apply):

<u>Category</u>	<u>% of responses (n= 57 respondents & 150 responses)</u>
Fishing technology	25
Fishing regulations	24
Business opportunities	29
Free admission	7
Other	15

3. How far did you travel to get here today?
(Choose one answer)

<u>Category</u>	<u>% of responses (n=63)</u>
Less than 25 miles	14
25-50 miles	19
51-75 miles	25
76-100 miles	21
More than 100 miles	21

4. What business category best describes your job in the commercial seafood sector?
(Choose one answer)

<u>Category</u>	<u>% of responses (n=63)</u>
Comm. Fishermen	60
Dock/Buyer	13
Seafood Processor	10
Seafood Retailer	13
Charter Captain	0
Other	5

5. Which fishery accounts for most of your commercial activity?
(Choose one answer)

<u>Category</u>	<u>% of responses (n=66)</u>
Shrimp	74
Oysters	11
Crabs	5
Finfish	6
Crawfish	3
None of the above	2

6. In what Louisiana coastal area (basin) does most of your business activity occur?
(Choose one answer)

<u>Category</u>	<u>% of responses (n=69)</u>
Calcasieu/Sabine	2
Vermillion/Cote Blanche	22
Terrebonne/Timbalier	41
Barataria	19
East of Mississippi River	17
None of the above	0

7. Which of these factors has had the greatest economic burden on your area of the industry?
(Choose one answer)

<u>Category</u>	<u>% of responses (n=71)</u>
Imports	44
Operating cost	13
Regulations	10
Environmental change	32
Other factors	1
No burden	0

8. “When it comes to new business starts-ups in my area of the fishing industry, I’m seeing...”
(Choose one answer)

<u>Category</u>	<u>% of responses (n=70)</u>
Much more	0
Slightly more	6
No change	6
Slightly less	40
Much less	49

9. “When I look around the industry, I see that most of the fishing boats in my region are run by...”

(Choose one answer)

<u>Category</u>	<u>% of responses (n=75)</u>
Older fishermen	76
Younger fishermen	8
About the same	15
Unsure	1

10. In the main business that you work for, where does most of the labor come from?

(Choose one answer)

<u>Category</u>	<u>% of responses (n=72)</u>
Me alone	13
My family and me	63
Other US citizens	18
Foreign workers	7
Unsure	0

11. What are the top concerns you see in recruiting quality workers for your area of the industry?

(Choose all that apply)

<u>Category</u>	<u>% of responses (n=72 respondents & 165 responses)</u>
Lack of applicants	19
Experience & knowledge	19
Work ethic & reliability	27
Language & immigration	7
Wage cost	18
Insurance	6
Other	4

12. What’s the most likely thing to become of your business if you (or your boss) stops working?

(Choose one answer)

<u>Category</u>	<u>% of responses (n=72)</u>
Pass it to child/family	31
Sell it quickly	22
Sell it slowly	24
Close without selling	14
Unsure	10

13. What government policies or programs offer the best chance for long-term growth in your sector?

(Choose all that apply)

<u>Category</u>	<u>% of responses (n=76)</u>
Restricting imports	16
Reducing regulations	24
Government payments	22
Low interest loans	12
Limiting entry	23
No intervention	4

14. Which of the following is most likely to improve the profitability of businesses in your sector?

(Choose all that apply)

<u>Category</u>	<u>% of responses (n=73)</u>
Better business planning	11
Improving product quality	10
Direct marketing to public	11
Value-added products	11
Pursuing new species	8
Expansion/consolidation	8
Improved marketing	41

15. What is needed to ensure there's a sufficient workforce to sustain the future of your industry?

(Choose all that apply)

<u>Category</u>	<u>% of responses (n=71 respondents & 163 responses)</u>
Training opportunities	15
Vocational education	12
Incentives for new fishermen	32
Journeyman certifications	6
Leadership programs	12
Seasonal worker legislation	12
Other	12

Summary of Audience Responses

- Results of the polling indicate that respondents came from a range of fishery sectors, although a large majority (60%) were commercial fishery harvesters. Primary species targeted reflected the economic contribution of the state's major coastal fisheries, with shrimp accounting for most respondents (74%), followed by oysters (11%), finfish (6%) and crabs (5%).

- More than 66% of respondents indicated their businesses were primarily located in the southeastern region, with the Terrebonne/Timbalier Basin accounting for the largest number of respondents (41%). Regardless of location, the majority of respondents (89%) indicated that they saw slightly less and much less new business startups in their areas.
- When asked about what factors has the greatest economic burden on their area of the industry, respondents identified imports (44%) and environmental changes (32%) as the largest contributing factors to the greatest economic burden.
- When asked what the demographics of their industry, respondents said that most of the fishing boats in their region are run by older fishers (76%), with few younger fishers (8%) or about the same (15%).
- More than half of respondents said that their fishing business labor is provided by family members (63%), with (13%) working alone, (18%) hiring US citizens and (7%) relying on foreign labor.
- Respondents acknowledged labor reliability and work ethic (27%), lack of applicants (19%), lack of experience and knowledge (19%), wage costs (18%), language and immigration barriers (7%), liability insurance (6%) and other (4%) as top concerns when hiring.
- Respondents had varying responses to how governmental policy could be used to assist the commercial fishing industry; reduced regulations (24%), limiting entry (23%), government payments (22%), and restricting imports (16%), while very few reported that no government intervention is necessary (4%).
- While 41% of respondents agreed that improved marketing would improve profit within the industry, some expressed an interest in better business planning (11%), direct marketing (11%), increasing value added products (11%) and improving product quality (10%). A few expressed interest in finding new species (8%) and expanding or consolidating of businesses (8%) as a way to improve profitability.
- Incentives to new fishers was the most frequently selected potential initiative option (32%), followed by training opportunities (15%) and vocational education (12%), leadership programs (12%) and seasonal worker legislation (12%) as ways to sustain the commercial fisheries workforce.

Summary of Panel Responses

The following sections contains selected comments from the panelists. For a complete record of the comments, a video of the session has been archived at: [Summit 2020 Workforce Development](#).

Industry Member's (Panelists) Comments

Topic: Economic Stress, New Startups and Aging Trends

- “The problem we have with imports right now and the last couple of years is, as a country we're consuming 1.2 to 1.3 billion pounds of shrimp a year. On the imports, we're importing 1.5 to 1.6 billion pounds, so that's a 2 to 3 hundred-million-pound surplus every year that's sitting in freezers before we go out and catch our first shrimp, so these imports is definitely a big problem.”
Rodney Olander, LSTF
- “We see this suppression of domestic prices because as more imported shrimp comes into the market, the prices of all the shrimp has to get lower, and then, you combine that with the rise in operating costs.”
Chalin Delaune, Tommy's Seafood
- “The truth is that we're getting hit with multiple burns from the imports, operating costs, regulations, environmental changes, and many others . . .”
Chalin Delaune, Tommy's Seafood
- “Well the industry has changed. The production levels have . . . varied throughout the years . . . due to environment concerns. . . . So the young person today looking into this industry. . . if he's not with his father or his uncle, he's got a tough road to tow, to stay with it and be enthused about it. . . . They do come because there's always an interest in being outdoors, working hard, [and] wanting to do something on your own, but I don't see many of them staying because there's not much future that they can see at this point.”
Steven Voisin, Motivaitit Seafood
- “You know, I tried to talk [my son] out of it like 50 times, and it's not happening. The kid sees a future in it. He sees fun; he sees freedom; he sees things that maybe I don't see . . . that's what gives me the heart and the passion to continue and to just see where we can improve, how we can improve, how we can promote, . . . how we can get better in every area of the industry. So that's why I'm here, my kids want to do it.”
Angela Portier, Faith Family Shrimp Co.

Topic: Labor Origin, Recruitment and Business Succession

- “I just think you have to have the right person for the job like if it's either a boat or a business, retail market, factory, dock, whatever you have, you have to have the right person, and I think that person mainly has to be brought up into the business. I think it'd be hard for somebody, like an outsider, just to come and take over, so it comes with trust. . . Other people have to trust you, and I just think it's more just a family thing, the whole seafood industry.”
Angela Portier, Faith Family Shrimp Co.

- “As far as . . . it relates to the labor . . . experience can be learned over time, and knowledge can be taught, and we've had good success with that philosophy in our business. We've had the most trouble . . . finding people with good work ethic that are dependable and reliable, so you don't have that, it doesn't really matter how much experience you have or how knowledgeable you are.”
Chalin Delaune, Tommy's Seafood
- “With the way the industry is going, these boats [are] getting to be where it's almost; you can't hardly sell them at all. It is almost impossible to give a boat away... It used to be that the fishermen, they would work . . . and then, when they were ready to retire, they would sell their boats. They would get a decent price for it, and that would be their little nest egg to help them along in their retirement days . . . The way things are going, they say you're lucky to be able to sell a boat at all, and if you do sell it, whatever you get, pennies on a dollar. You're not getting nowhere near what the value of your boat is worth . . . it's getting extremely hard.”
Rodney Olander, LSTF
- “One of reasons why we keep family on the boat is because there's probably, between 90 - 95 percent of the boats are uninsured. There is no insurance on it. If we're struggling now to pay the bills, there's no way in hell we can afford to pay insurance on anyone. That's probably why you're seeing that number being 5 percent on insurance.”
Rodney Olander, LSTF
- “Sometimes, you get caught between hiring a quality worker, being able to afford that quality worker, the health insurance that goes along with that, should you offer that coverage, which of course we do, and sometimes, those are the things that you have to do to be able to attract quality people, and like Rodney [Olander] was saying, it doesn't reflect in the price that you're selling your product at, and so when you have these rising insurance costs, the rising wage of labor, the other things that you have to, the incentives that you have to provide to that labor, that ultimately, you would hope you'd be able to recuperate in the price of the product that you sell. When that doesn't happen, then you have to go back to the drawing board and try to develop a new strategy.”
Chalin Delaune, Tommy's Seafood

Topic: Government and Innovation

- “On question 14, so I think that all of these are good solutions. Many of which we've implemented in our business, and many of which I've seen across the industry on every level of the industry whether it's on the boats turning into microprocessors or processors getting into value-added products or new species or for us, I think this just brings it back to adapting to the circumstances that you're around.”
Chalin Delaune, Tommy's Seafood
- “For us, our most recent venture includes both consolidating and expanding. We have several facilities. One of which, we're moving out of and selling to move into a smaller facility, so we're consolidating, and we're also opening up a dock next month in Cameron

Parish to be able to vertically integrate backwards and get one step closer to the source and improve our margins because of these increase overhead and other expenses.”
Chalin Delaune, Tommy’s Seafood

Topic: Workforce Development

- “The biggest one I see here is C, incentives for new fishermen. I may want to add to that; instead of having incentives for new fishermen, they should also have incentives to keep the old fishermen.”
Rodney Olander, LSTF

Management and Sea Grant Representatives’ Comments

(Note: Representatives listened to audience and industry panel responses but did not participate in the discussion of individual questions. They were present to listen and give summary remarks at the conclusion.)

- “A lot of what I'm hearing today is not unlike what we heard from larger contingent meetings that we had all around the coast here in the Louisiana Seafood Future Project, and it's basically, "We're struggling. Imports are hurting. We need some assistance. We need some help.”
Patrick Banks, LDWF
- “I think where we as the government can help is to help find the options for industries to move forward, . . . so I just don't see anything that we can do from a governmental standpoint to say, "Hey! Here's, this is going to solve your issue," outside of maybe some import help. I think that's one of the biggest things that government can help with, but outside of that, it's going to be little steps along the way to try to make the climate, the business climate, better for you guys to make your own decisions, and so that's what we're trying to focus on at Wildlife and Fisheries these days is listen to the ideas that you guys have and figure out where in those ideas we can help move them forward, and so you know . . . it does concern me what I'm hearing.”
Patrick Banks, LDWF
- “I hope that we can all find a way to give encouragement to the younger generation. I know there's younger generation folks out there. I see them on the water. I've interacted with a few of them. Getting them to these kinds of forums would be helpful. Getting them to take on some of these more leadership roles, something that Chalin [Delaune] is doing, is a great thing for us to see with our agency, so we stand ready to work with the new generation as well even if it's just a few folks.”
Patrick Banks, LDWF
- “Louisiana Sea Grant has been active for over 50 years now in Louisiana. They're trying to do a variety of projects. Usually what we try to get from you guys is what you need, commercial viability, alternative species, what are other things you can do, technology transfer.”
Julie Lively, Louisiana Sea Grant

Concluding Industry Panelists' Comments

- “I don't want anyone to give up. We're not quitting. We're fighting for the industry. I've been to Washington twice already this year. I plan to go again. I plan on making phone calls to them also, so all I want to say is don't give up. We're fighting for the industry.”
Rodney Olander, LSTF

- “I would just like to say that as a fisherman, I really enjoy fishing and learning how to fish. It took years to really learn how to survive with fishing, and it was very enjoyable, and you fall in love with it, as I'm sure most of you are at fishing on a commercial level. It's challenging. It's stressful. It's wonderful. It's all of the above, and you know, we want it to continue here in south Louisiana.”
Steven Voisin, Motivaitit Seafood

Prepared by: Nicole Lundberg, Rex Caffey, Earl Melancon, Julie Lively, Louisiana Sea Grant College Program, December 2020.