

## **The Social and Economic Problems of The Florida Commercial Fisherman**

ARTHUR H. TODD, *Secretary-Treasurer, Florida Brotherhood of Fishermen*

THE INTEREST of the Florida Brotherhood of Fishermen is centered on the commercial fisherman and in improving his economic condition. In order to accomplish this purpose it is essential to have a complete and comprehensive scientific survey of our salt water resources. Conservation laws must be revised and ample funds must be provided to carry on continuous scientific research and to assure enforcement of the laws and rulings laid down. Salt water conservation is used as a political football and it is imperative that this situation be changed in one way or another. The social ills from which the fisherman suffer can be cured by an improvement in his economic condition. At the present time probably less than 20 per cent can read and write. This condition exists mainly because he had to start fishing to help provide a bare existence for the family when he should have been in school. The situation is improving through the Public School system of transportation, and insistence on school attendance. Many thousands of our commercial fishermen live in homes that are no more than shacks, and without enough chairs to seat the entire family at one time. Many are without screens and do not have any of the modern conveniences that even our day laborers have. Ninety five per cent are continuously in debt to fish dealers and are kept in a virtual state of peonage as a result of this indebtedness. Although the commercial fisherman is theoretically an independent producer he cannot be independent with a club over his head.

The causes of this condition may be considered under six headings.

First of all is the low level of fish production. For over two years production has been low. During the Red Tide on the west coast very few fish were landed. Appeals were made to the Senators and Congressmen but only wires and letters were received stating that no funds were available for direct relief. A plan to set up stations of some kind along the coast to give temporary employment to the fishermen was suggested, but nothing was done. Since the scourge of the Red Tide, production has not returned to its previous level and unless some sensible conservation is put into effect, it probably will not do so.

Unfair competition is a second cause. Tens of thousands of people come to Florida every year ostensibly for sport fishing. The fact is, however, that they fish as a business and sell their catches commercially. Thousands of Florida residents, who earn a good living in various other trades and professions, turn to commercial fishing during the run season. This helps to create a glut on the market and to lower prices for the year-round commercial fisherman.

Third are the many harmful and destructive methods used by both commercial and sport fishermen.

Fourth is the lack of enforcement of conservation laws. Everyone in the fishing industry knows how little enforcement there is of existing conservation laws. Untold thousands of pounds of under-legal-size trout alone are caught and sold each year by both commercial and so-called sport fishermen. Last year during the closed season on mullet it was common knowledge that several hundred thousand pounds of mullet were netted, transported out of Florida and sold.

Fifth is the opposition of some factions to any change being made in the methods of applying conservation to the salt water fisheries. It is very apparent that they want salt water conservation to remain in the same chaotic condition that has prevailed for many years.

Sixth is unjust taxation. For years the commercial fisherman has been paying a road tax of six cents per gallon on gas used strictly in vessels engaged in commercial fishing. This tax alone amounts to several hundred dollars per year to many of our fishermen. Governor Fuller Warren recognized the unfairness of this tax and asked the legislature to relieve the fishermen of this burden. However, a bill to relieve the fishermen of this tax was killed in committee.

The Florida Brotherhood of Fishermen has attempted to relieve this situation, but it failed in accomplishing anything at the last meeting of the State Legislature. Almost two years were spent holding meetings and interviewing commercial fishermen throughout the tidal waters of Florida, and finally a program was worked out which was approved by twenty-two branches of our organization.

Here is the original program:

1. That all local and special fishing laws be repealed at once.
2. That legislation be enacted to give full power over salt water conservation to the present Conservation Board, with a provision that a complete factual scientific survey of all salt water resources be made as speedily as possible and that the Board be governed by the findings of this survey in making future rules and regulations governing our salt water resources.
3. That, for the protection of our commercial fishermen and to provide sufficient funds to finance the continuation of research, the following license fees be imposed: Resident commercial fishermen, \$25.00 per year; out of State and alien commercial fishermen, \$100.00 per year.
4. That it should be made unlawful for any persons except licensed commercial fishermen to sell their catch.
5. That a small license fee and a bag limit be imposed on sport fishermen.
6. That the commercial fishermen be exempt from payment of the six cent road tax on gasoline used in commercial fishing craft.

We attempted to work out a joint program with the commercial fish dealers. A meeting of commercial fishermen's representatives and fish dealers was held on December 18, 1948 and the following program was agreed upon:

(1) That the mullet fishery research program started by the University of Miami Marine Laboratory in October, 1948 be continued, and expanded to include all species of salt water fish and seafood produced in Florida waters, this to be a permanent program. (2) That priority be exercised to determine if some methods of taking fish such as stop netting, seining, and with small mesh nets are harmful to the fishery. (3) That all local and special fishing laws be repealed and the basic fishing laws be revised under the supervision of the scientists. (4). In order to provide ample funds for the research program, that all commercial fishermen be licensed as follows: Resident commercial fishermen, \$5.00 per year; out of State and alien commercial fishermen, \$25.00 per year. The above license fees were to be used exclusively to finance the research program. (5) That it be made unlawful for any person or persons other than regular licensed commercial fishermen to sell their catch.

The matter of license and bag limits on sport fishing was left to the discretion of the Executive Committee, the general opinion being that a small license fee be charged and a reasonable bag limit should be imposed. It was agreed that the gasoline road tax as applied to commercial fishing craft is unjust and that every effort be made to have this tax removed at the earliest possible date.

The following Executive Committee was elected to carry out the program as outlined above: Robert Combs, Naples, Fla.; Heber Bell, St. Petersburg, Fla.; Archie Turner, Naples, Fla.; Arthur H. Todd, St. Petersburg, Fla.

To act in an advisory capacity to the Committee the following were appointed: Dr. F. G. Walton Smith, Miami, Florida; Honorable L. C. Yeomans, Crystal River, Fla.; Mr. Wendell C. Heaton, Tallahassee, Fla.

Although this program was not entirely to the liking of the commercial fishermen, since they felt that the license fees were too low, and no provision was made to take the Conservation Department out of politics, it was their belief that jointly it could be implemented and the economic condition of the commercial fisherman improved to some extent.

Although the fish dealers insisted on the changes made in the original program and voted to support it, when it was attempted to get action to have the necessary bills prepared, the matter was delayed. The Florida Wildlife Federation asked the commercial fishermen to support a plan for a salt water fish commission composed of five men. A meeting was held on March 16, 1949 at St. Petersburg. Commercial fishermen and fish dealers and the Florida Wildlife Federation were represented, the Florida Commercial Fisheries Association, the Florida Wildlife Federation and the Florida Brotherhood of Fishermen participating.

The purpose of this meeting was to bring the largest organized groups of interested parties together in an attempt to reconcile differences of opinion and to produce a unified program for the preparation of legislation on salt water conservation to be presented at the Legislature in Tallahassee.

The Florida commercial fish dealers recommended that the appointment of the Supervisor of Conservation be taken out of the hands of the Governor and be made by a majority vote of the cabinet. They recommended that all fishing laws be enforced and that the legislators give all local and special fishing laws presented close attention and consideration before passage.

The Florida Wildlife Federation's proposal was to establish a Salt Water Fish Commission, composed of five Commissioners. The dealers' delegates opposed the setting up of a Salt Water Fish Commission. The Florida Brotherhood of Fishermen would not approve the Commission plan unless some changes were made, providing that at least two of the commissioners be experienced commercial fishermen, that the commissioners have a per diem allowance, and that the commission be guided by the findings of the Marine Laboratory of the University of Miami in promulgating their regulations. This was agreed on, and drafts of the necessary legislation for presentation at the coming session of the Legislature were ordered. The support of the Florida Wildlife Federation was asked on three bills to be presented by the Florida Brotherhood of Fishermen. (1) That resident commercial fishermen be licensed at \$5.00 per year and that alien or out of state commercial fishermen be licensed at \$50.00 per year. (2) That sport fishermen be licensed at \$1.00 per year and that a reasonable bag limit be imposed. (3) That the 6c gasoline tax on gas used in commercial fishing craft be removed.

The Florida Wildlife Federation agreed to support these measures.

Despite these agreements the bills were not prepared as planned and none was approved by the Legislature. Thus progress in improving our salt water fisheries and the social and economic states of commercial fishermen has once more been delayed.