

Shrimp and the 200-Mile Issue

ROBERT G. MAUERMANN, *Executive Director*
Texas Shrimp Association and
Shrimp Association of the Americas
Brownsville, Texas

All of us who are concerned with our fishery resources, whether our interests are commercial or recreational, want the same thing — an optimum sustainable yield, although some of us may march to the sound of a different drummer. Many of my colleagues in the Northeast and the Pacific Northwest are sincerely convinced that U.S. fishermen can best be served by an extension of our fishery zone to 200 miles from our shores and that the passage of legislation by the U.S. Congress providing for such action would eliminate the competition from foreign fishing fleets. I will agree that foreign fishing fleets combined with our own are over-fishing several important species in what has historically been America's most important fishing areas in both the North Pacific and the North Atlantic. I disagree, however, that the passage of legislation proclaiming U.S. fisheries jurisdiction over a 200-mile area in what is now considered international waters is the solution for several reasons.

First, such a law would be enforceable only if the world's major fishing nations agreed to recognize such a radical departure from the principle of freedom of the seas. Foreign fishermen are not likely to recognize the U.S. claim to an extended fisheries zone into what is now accepted as international waters by the major powers of the world anymore than we have recognized similar claims by several of the Latin American countries.

More importantly, the unilateral extension of our fisheries zone to 200 miles provides no protection, or at least very little, to the salmon or the tunas, both of which range the ocean far beyond the 200-mile zone. The only solution to the maintenance of optimum sustainable yields of these species is through enforceable international agreements. It is my hope, and I should think the hope of fishermen all over the world, that the Law of the Sea Conference will ultimately provide such agreements.

The original U.S. position at the Law of the Sea Conference was based on a species management concept which did not include an extended economic zone. Since the meeting began, however, the official U.S. position, as outlined by Ambassador Stevenson in his address to the Conference on July 11, 1974, indicated that our government would agree to an extended economic zone to 200 miles provided that such a package included provision for the management of anadromous species and the migrating oceanic species, and further, Mr. Stevenson contemplates that it will be the coastal states' duty to permit foreign fishing under a reasonable license and under coastal state regulations to the extent that a fisheries resource is not fully utilized by the coastal state.

There are two points in this position statement which are of great concern to the distant water shrimp fishermen. First, who is to decide whether or not a fishery resource is fully utilized? Biologists studying shrimp populations have been un-

able to agree on this issue in the Gulf of Mexico, although research in this area has covered an expanse of many years. Secondly, the Ambassador's statement does not mention historic fishing rights and yet that is what much of the sound and fury is all about. The 200-mile advocates who are pushing for unilateral U.S. action are trying by this legislation to protect their historic rights to the fishery resources off our coast in waters which have been considered as international by the world community. The U.S. shrimp industry feels that such unilateral action by the U.S. would jeopardize the historic fishing rights of distant water shrimp fishermen who are largely responsible for the development of this fishery throughout Latin America.

In this connection it is important for us to recognize that 18% of the shrimp landed in Gulf ports in 1973 were caught by distant water shrimp fishermen operating off the coast of several Latin American countries. These landings amounted to 37 million pounds worth over 40 million dollars. Therefore, it becomes immediately apparent that the shrimp fishing industry stands to gain nothing from an extended American fisheries jurisdiction. In fact, unilateral action by the U.S. will undoubtedly trigger similar action by Mexico. Legislation now pending in the Congress of the U.S. has already strengthened Mexico's position on the 200-mile issue. I fully expect that our neighbor to the south will unilaterally declare a 200-mile Patrimonial Sea in both the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific within a matter of days, if the U.S. Congress passes 200-mile legislation.

We do not quarrel with the basic concept of granting coastal states preferential rights over coastal species. We do, however, object to the ultimate elimination of a very important segment of the Gulf shrimp industry by the stroke of a pen. We are willing to cooperate with the Latin American countries in the management of this resource and we are willing to pay our fair share of the management costs in the form of licenses. We feel that our Law of the Sea position should include language that addresses the issue of historic fishing rights.

An extension of fisheries jurisdiction by the Republic of Mexico and other Latin American countries without some consideration for American fishing rights off their coasts would result in the return to American shrimping areas in the Gulf of Mexico off our own coast of a great number of fishing vessels, possibly as many as 600. This increased pressure would certainly further reduce the annual landings per vessel and create further financial problems to vessel owners. The Gulf shrimp industry is already caught in an economic crunch far greater than any it has known in the past because of the enormous increases in the cost of fuel and other production costs.

The U.S. shrimp industry, America's most valuable fishery, could survive through bilateral or multilateral treaties with its neighbors to the south. Such arrangements, however, are of no help to the salmon or tuna fishermen. If America's three most valuable commercial fisheries are to remain viable a combination of enforceable international conventions and regional agreements are going to be necessary, and these can be negotiated only by a Law of the Sea Conference.