

BLUE PAPERS

Louisiana Commercial Fishers

One of Louisiana's greatest treasures is the culture, heritage and skill of traditional, multi-generational, commercial fishers. Quietly and efficiently, Vietnamese, Cajun, Creole, and Native American fishers have provided seafood to the best restaurants and tables year-round for over a century. Images of this unique fishing culture have become synonymous with Louisiana.

There are over 15,000 commercial fishers in Louisiana, and the impact of commercial fishing on the state is estimated to be 2.8 billion dollars. The industry also supports a total of 31,400 jobs and creates an additional 107 million dollars in state sales and income tax revenue. The commercial fishing industry includes thousands of families, a rich tradition and culture, and is intertwined with the prosperity of rural communities laced all along the coast of Louisiana.

Traditional fishers are earth-based people. Their sense of future is tied to the earth. As modern society becomes less earth-based, fishers struggle to resist becoming irrelevant and marginalized. Fishers now struggle against the rapid increase of the amounts of imported, farm raised shrimp and crawfish. Once able to function profitably by off-loading their catch at local docks, fishers must now create new strategies and solutions, including direct marketing to the public, identifying and developing niche markets, quality control programs and branding. Coastal development for recreational fishing threatens existing dock leases and leads to increasing land prices. Environmental problems such as marsh deterioration and a growing "dead zone" may impact fishery resources, not just for commercial fishers, but for recreational fishers as well.

We believe that the Louisiana State Legislature as well as the U.S. Congress, should respond to this ongoing human and coastal disaster through its fiscal priorities and should spotlight this wreckage of commercial fishing businesses and culture with no less urgency:

- Establish a special initiative for economic development and technical assistance for fishing families whose livelihoods in fishing have been diminished or destroyed.
- Establish a special revolving loan fund backed by State bonds and accessible at low rates to fishers for transitioning to new businesses.
- Incorporate a "fair and balanced use" strategy into the management of Louisiana's fisheries.
- Provide new models of representation within the state's system of fishery task forces, so as to provide for balanced representation and more input from local family fishers.
- Encourage underutilized fishery species to be developed for commercial purposes.
- Provide official recognition of the economic and cultural value of the commercial fishing industry.
- Dedicate time and resources to the exploration of niche market development, quality assurance and educational programs by state-funded agencies.