

PRESSING ISSUES IN THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA FISHERIES

(Abstract of Testimony Given by Orlando Amoroso to the “Habitat and Living Resources Panel” of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, 19 April 2002, Southwest Regional Meeting, Los Angeles, CA)

I am pleased to address this panel on behalf of the Southern California Commercial Fishing Association. Our membership consists of thirty plus purse seine vessel owners that make San Pedro their homeport. These captains are small business owners engaged in the harvesting of wetfish, a fishery comprised of sardine, jack and Pacific mackerel, anchovy, California market squid and, when available, tuna.

Wetfish, also known in a less traditional context as the Coastal Pelagic Species (CPS), is California dominant fishery and San Pedro is homeport to California’s largest CPS fleet. Nearly fifty percent of the vessels that are permitted to harvest the CPS (under Amendment 8 to the Northern Anchovy Fishery Management Plan) are moored at and operate from Berth 73, San Pedro Fisherman’s Wharf.

The socio-historic profile of the wetfish industry can be characterized by the following facts: (1) Most of the vessel owners and the fish processors have roots dating back to the traditional industry of the late nineteenth century, (2) Monterey and San Pedro have played key roles in the development of the wetfish industry, (3) Monterey and San Pedro processors have found it necessary to extend their receiving capabilities to Ventura and Hueneme, (4) Today’s industry is structured around three regional centers: San Pedro, Monterey Bay and Ventura and their corresponding harbors of Los Angeles, Moss Landing and Port Hueneme, (5) Purse seine vessels from the Pacific Northwest have become seasonal participants.

The economic overview of the wetfish industry can be highlighted as follows: (1) In the year 2000, commercial landings of wetfish totaled 228,000 short tons. This output is worth \$39 million ex-vessel and accounts for 84 percent by weight and 29 percent by value of California commercial landings, (2) Real value added by fishermen ranges from a low of \$10.5 million in 1922 to a high of \$36 million in 2000, (3) Two thirds of this real value was generated by market squid, (4) Real value added by receivers/processors is estimated to be twice that added by fishermen.

As to the health status of the wetfish industry, the following statements reflect the view of the scientific community: (1) Sardine abundance fluctuates in a sixty year cycle with a decline in population that lasts an average of thirty-six years and a recovery period that lasts an average of thirty. Within this cycle, the sardine resource was considered fully recovered in 1998. (2) Market squid abundance fluctuates in a natural cycle that is not fully understood. The squid resource is known to recover in a relatively short time and could be harvested more aggressively if size and status of population were known, (3) The knowledge of Pacific mackerel abundance and fluctuations cycle is limited. According to the experts, “ it is unlikely that the recently achieved harvest levels can be sustained”.

The major issue of concern to California fishermen and processors is the continued access to CPS resources. A number of regulatory processes and initiatives are presently underway that may adversely affect industry's access to the resource:

- A squid Fishery Management Plan (FMP) is being developed by the California Department of Fish and Game. The FMP will address provisions for limited entry, "replenishment zones", trip limits and/or caps on season landings. This planning process screams for industry advice and for stakeholder participation.
- Harvest guidelines for sardine and mackerel are being developed with the use of archaic models that no longer reflect the dynamics of the fisheries. Consequently, the industry is skeptic about the basis and validity of these guidelines.

Another issue of concern is the lack of resources, at both state and federal levels, needed to adequately conduct applied research and scientific investigation in support of these fisheries. For example:

- The Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) for squid is presently undetermined. In order to meet FMP requirements, a MSY proxy based on an unproven egg escapement model has been proposed. Considering the real value of this fishery, a research program aimed at widening the scope of these objectives and increasing the knowledge of the squid population would better serve the industry.
- The full extent of sardine resources along the west coast is not known. A comprehensive biomass survey (leading to the development of new models) is essential to lend credibility to biomass estimates and harvest guidelines.
- Present harvest guidelines for sardine are based on a conservative formula that subtracts the Mexican biomass from the U.S. population. No effort is made to account for the Canadian component. The Tri-State Sardine Forum, now approaching its third year of operation, is a welcome initiative that should be elevated to U.S. State Department level.

Aggressive efforts aimed at implementing Marine Protected Areas in the Channel Islands and off the California Coast, will severely impact the economic viability of the wetfish industry. Ironically, the implementation of no-take zones will not measurably benefit the CPS. The concept of adaptive management and the notion of "phasing in" reserve networks one piece at the time are sensible management options and deserve serious consideration.