THE TRIBUNE
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Longtime foes find a way to work together

David Sneed

Mon, Jul. 28, 2008

TRIBUNE PHOTO BY DAVID MIDDLECAMP - Michael Bell, with the trawler South Bay, is the manager of The Nature Conservancy's Central Coast fisheries program.

It's a case of strange bedfellows.

Many along the Morro Bay waterfront never thought they would live to see the day when fishermen and conservationists would be working together to manage commercial fishing along the Central Coast.

But in 2006, faced with the complete collapse of trawl fishing along the Central Coast, The Nature Conservancy took the unprecedented step of buying Morro Bay's trawl fishing fleet.

The group teamed up with San Francisco-based Environmental Defense to see if they could help rebuild Morro Bay's tattered fishing industry using new, sustainable fishing techniques.

"We think it is very possible to build a resilient and profitable fishery, and that's what we are working toward," said Kate Bonzon, a fisheries specialist with Environmental Defense.

Fishermen and environmentalists are traditional adversaries. Environmentalists by nature want as much resource protection as possible, while fishermen consider themselves to be the real conservationists who have a personal stake in protecting fish stocks to ensure they can keep fishing.

So fishermen were skeptical of the new partnership, to say the least. But they had little choice.

“Morro Bay’s trawl fleet was underperforming both environmentally and economically,” said Michael Bell, manager of The Nature Conservancy’s Central Coast fisheries program.

The fleet was struggling under ever-increasing limits and closures, and the owners of the aging boats seized the opportunity to sell out, even if it was to a bunch of environmentalists.

“It was a partnership born out of necessity,” said Rick Algert, Morro Bay harbor manager.

The Nature Conservancy scrapped two of the four trawlers it purchased and kept the other two, which are docked at the North T pier along Morro Bay’s Embarcadero.

One of the trawlers, the South Bay, is leased to veteran fisherman Ed Ewing.

He is experimenting with new, low impact trawling gear using one of The Nature Conservancy’s permits. It’s an uneasy partnership.

“They (environmentalists) thought they knew it all; it turned out they didn’t know anything,” he said. “They’re getting a real education now.

“I don’t like what they did and they know it, but they did it and they did it legally,” he added. “I’m not sure how it’s going to work out.”

Although Ewing is skeptical of the future of the partnership, he and other fishermen are glad the conservancy is offering a way for trawl fishing to continue along the Central Coast.

“Fishermen are pretty independent and like to argue about a lot of things, but we are going to have to cooperate to get more access to the resource,” Ewing said.

For their part, Nature Conservancy officials acknowledge that fishermen bring decades of knowledge of the ocean to the table.

The new partnership has been dubbed the Central Coast Community based Fishing Association. It includes the two environmental groups, fishermen and Morro Bay officials, among others.

In addition to helping to rebuild a more environmentally friendly fishing industry, the association also hopes to be a powerful voice in how fishing along the West Coast is managed.

More changes are on the way for commercial fishing, and coastal communities such as Morro Bay are demanding a say.

One change is the individual fishing quota, recently adopted by the Pacific Fisheries Management Council, that regulates deep-water fishing along the West Coast.

Rather than just allocating fishing permits, quotas allow fishermen to buy a secure percentage of the fishery. Federal fisheries managers have not decided who will be able to purchase the quotas—individual fishermen, communities or fish processors or a combination of all three.

Because the fishing association represents a diverse collection of stakeholders, it will be better able to influence state and federal fisheries management decisions, including fishing quotas, Bonzon said.

“We see Morro Bay as being uniquely positioned due to the dedication of the city and the partnerships of the fishing community,” she said. “Everyone is at the table.” *Reach David Sneed at 781-7930.*

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An old seadog’s new tricks

David Sneed

Mon, Jul. 28, 2008

Ed Ewing may not look like it, but he could well be the future of commercial fishing along the Central Coast.

Working aboard the trawler South Bay, Ewing looks every inch the grizzled fisherman that he is. But the South Bay is no ordinary trawl boat, and the nets spooled on its stern are unusual as well.

The South Bay is owned by The Nature Conservancy and leased to Ewing. The trawl nets are smaller and lighter, designed specifically to be less damaging to the ocean floor and catch fewer unwanted types of fish than traditional nets.

Ewing, 62, has been fishing out of Morro Bay for 40 years. Working with The Nature Conservancy and experimenting with new gear are unexpected turns in his career, changes necessitated by a near collapse of the trawl fishery along the West Coast.

Like many fishermen, Ewing resented environmentalists who have pushed for closures

and catch limits in order to give fish stocks maximum protection.

“The only reason I got involved with this whole deal was because they pissed me off so Goddamned bad,” Ewing said. “There were no fish coming in here.”

Health problems have limited the amount of work that Ewing can do on the South Bay as well as the number of fishing trips he's been able to make. He recently underwent quadruple bypass heart surgery and is in line for a kidney transplant.

When he does get out to sea, however, the trawling Ewing does is highly specialized.

According to the fishing permit he uses, which is held by The Nature Conservancy, he must trawl only over soft seafloor and avoid rock piles and other sensitive areas.

His nets are about a third smaller and lighter than those used by the typical trawler. The footrope, the part of the net that drags across the bottom, is also smaller.

These changes address the first of two environmental problems traditional trawling is known to cause — damage to the ocean floor. Seafloor is important habitat for some fish species.

Under the old paradigm of trawling, fishermen wanted to catch the maximum amount of fish with every drag.

"They did a lot of damage because they were big boats with heavy gear," Ewing said.

The smaller nets also are intended to address trawling's second environmental problem—bycatch. Large, heavy trawl nets scoop up anything in their path. This means a variety of unwanted sea life is harvested as well. Deeper dwelling fish are killed when they are dragged to the surface, so some trawling can result in large amounts of waste.

Ewing's fishing trips last for a day and a half to two days and involve multiple drags. He typically returns with 15,000 to 16,000 pounds of fish, mostly Petrale sole and other flatfish that sell for a premium. Bigger trawlers will catch that much fish in a single drag.

Demand in Morro Bay for Ewing's smaller, more selective catches is high. Consumers are generally willing to pay 10 percent to 20 percent more for locally and sustainably caught fish.

And there's enough consumer demand for one or two more lowimpact trawlers like Ewing's, said Rick Algert, Morro Bay harbor manager.

Mark Tognazzini buys about 10 percent of Ewing's catch for his two Tognazzini's Dockside Restaurants in Morro Bay.

He buys much of Ewing's bycatch as well, such as small rockfish and rays, and personally fillets them and offers them as specials in his restaurants so that very little goes to waste.

"The work Eddie is doing is important," he said. "It's really just old-school trawling."

Since he began fishing in Morro Bay in 1968, Ewing has seen a lot of changes. During that time, state and federal regulators have struggled to keep up.

Like most fishermen, he thinks regulators overreact to changes in the ocean environment and make decisions that are based on insufficient scientific data.

"Between the government and the environmentalists, they are trying to use a sledgehammer to drive a tack," he said. "We just want to control our own destiny without outside interests."

He looks forward to a day when a sustainable commercial fishing industry is established along the Central Coast and large swaths of the Pacific that are now closed to fishing are reopened. But that is likely to be many years away.

"We are just going to have to grind away at things," he said.

Reach David Sneed at 781-7930.

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Ask the Editor: Morro Bay series focuses on solutions

The three-day Tribune report is the result of work by several staffers over six months

Mon, July 28, 2008

By Sandra Duerr

TRIBUNE PHOTO BY JOE JOHNSTON

Severe declines in the fishing industry are threatening the historic image of working boats moored on quiet Morro Bay.

Today on Page One is the second part of our three-part series on how the fishing industry's collapse is affecting Morro Bay.

This series came about because of questions posed by our talented and thoughtful city editor, Matt Lazier, who oversees local news coverage countywide.

For years, local commercial fishermen have been telling our journalists that the development of fishing restrictions along the Central Coast has steadily been eroding their business.

Indeed, the health of commercial fishing has declined dramatically, and the city of Morro Bay has been dealt particularly harsh blows because its local economy relied heavily on commercial fishing.

The situation prompted Lazier to wonder: What should Morro Bay do to remain economically viable— and could it do so successfully?

To answer those questions, Lazier asked environmental reporter David Sneed and Morro Bay reporter Sona Patel to undertake the project under the direction of Assistant City Editor/ Business Editor Tony Prado. Senior photographer David Middlecamp took the pictures.

They began their research more than six months ago, juggling daily stories as well. You're now reading the results of their work.

Regular readers will know that we've written extensively on this issue for years. But this marks the first time we've pulled all the information together and focused on solutions, both for the fishing industry and the city of Morro Bay.

We included how the city of Eureka responded to a similar crisis two decades ago because we believe its approach offers local city and business leaders insight and lessons. We trust you will agree.

Sneed, who has written on local environmental issues for more than a dozen years, says he was struck by how a consensus is emerging about how crucial it is for the Central Coast's fishing industry to survive. "Even traditional adversaries, like environmentalists and fishermen, agree on this," Sneed notes. "It's just the details they're still arguing about."

Sneed added that he "never ceases to be amazed at how passionate we are about the ocean and its resources. It's why many of us live here, and it affects every aspect of our lives — from the weather to the economy.''

For Patel, who has covered Morro Bay, Los Osos and Cayucos the past two years, it became clear that Morro Bay isn't the only small city facing a potential financial crisis. "Smaller cities

are going to have to come up with ways to stay afloat and offset rising labor costs,'' she says. "In Morro Bay's case, city officials will have to come up with sustainable and diverse sources of revenue and not rely solely on one sector like tourism. And, businesses and City Council will have to work together."

As the main editor overseeing the project, Prado says the most difficult part of the series was "to be comprehensive without overwhelming readers with too much data and too many anecdotes."

As always, we're interested in your reaction. Please contact us at the address below, or share your letter to the editor by writing to letters@thetribunenews.com.

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Fisherman's wife aims to change public perception

David Sneed

Mon, Jul. 28, 2008

Lori French says California fishermen have unfairly received a bad reputation.

A lot of people think fishermen harm the ocean environment. In reality, 90 percent of commercial fishing boats are family-owned businesses that have been fishing sustainably for generations, she said.

French, who's married to Morro Bay fisherman Jeff French, is part of a growing effort to educate the public about fishermen and the food they produce.

The Morro Bay woman recently obtained a $35,000 grant to start "The Faces of California Fishing" campaign, which is designed to put a human face on the state's family fishermen.

"There's a real need for awareness when it comes to seafood," she said. "Most people aren't aware of where seafood comes from, how it is regulated for health and environmental standards and who actually caught it."

The campaign is the result of research that shows consumers prefer locally caught seafood and are willing to pay more for it if they know that harvesting the fish did not damage the ocean environment. A recent survey of households in the state by the Monterey-based Alliance of Communities for Sustainable Fisheries showed that Californians realize that the state's fishing industry is one of the most regulated in the world.

Eighty-two percent of respondents said they would rather buy locally caught seafood, and 63 percent would not be willing to buy imported seafood if that meant putting the state's family fishermen out of business.

Fishermen and environmentalists are hoping to capitalize on that knowledge. They can market their catch as locally and sustainably caught and charge premium prices for it.

“People are frustrated when they eat at a restaurant in Morro Bay and see Hawaiian-caught fish on the menu,” said Michael Bell, Central Coast fisheries program manager for The Nature Conservancy. “They want more local choices.”

Morro Bay fish buyer and seafood restaurant owner Mark Tognazzini labels the seafood he sells in his market and restaurants that was landed in Morro Bay and Port San Luis as “wild/local.” He sometimes goes as far as listing the name of the local fisherman who caught it.

This demand for locally and sustainably caught seafood extends to larger markets in Los Angeles and the Bay Area. Buyers there have told local fishermen that they will take all the high-quality seafood they can produce.

LEARN MORE ABOUT FISHERMEN

Check out www.thefacesofcaliforniafishing.com. It has information about where to buy locally caught fish in markets and directly off fisher-men’s boats, short biographies of

fishermen, seafood recipes and fishing lore. Lori French said she hopes the Web site will reassure seafood consumers and producers alike. “We want to let people know we are here and we are not going anywhere.”

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Strangled by regulations, high gas prices and declining fish stocks, Morro Bay’s fishermen are struggling to survive in an era where sustainability is priority No. 1

Fishing industry’s golden age is gone

By David Sneed

Sun, Jul. 27, 2008

The numbers are startling.

Fishermen operating out of Morro Bay are bringing in less than one-tenth of the fish they did about a decade and a half ago.

In 1990, they landed more than 9.6 million pounds of fish, according to the state Department of Fish and Game.

In 2006, the most recent year for which data are available, the catch had fallen to just over 868,000 pounds—a plunge of nearly 91 percent.

Morro Bay fishermen caught about $4.8 million worth of fish in 1990. Adjusted to 2006 dollars, that represents about $7.4 million.

In 2006, Morro Bay landed $2.9 million worth of fish — just over 39 percent of the adjusted 1990 amount.

These numbers demonstrate vividly the steady decline of San Luis Obispo County's commercial fishing industry in recent years, said Henry Pontarelli, who recently assessed the industry infrastructure with his wife, Lisa Wise, using a state Coastal Conservancy grant.

The local numbers mirror a statewide trend. California's landings peaked in 1981 at more than 900 million pounds and declined to 292 million pounds by 2005—a decline of more than 67 percent.

"Today, California's fishing industry is faced with a perfect storm of trouble including declining revenues and limited access to fish stocks," said Rod Fujita, a fisheries scientist with the group Environmental Defense.

So what happened to cause such a collapse? That depends on whom you ask, said Rick Algert, Morro Bay's harbor manager.

Environmentalists and the public attribute it to declines in fish stocks from overfishing.

But most fishermen say it's because of vastly reduced fishing efforts that were brought upon by regulations and increasing costs — factors that are driving many fishermen and fishing businesses out of the industry.

Many believe it's a combination of both harvest restrictions and stock declines.

State and federal fisheries managers are faced with the daunting task of setting catch limits based on murky stock assessments. They must limit fishing to levels that they believe do not endanger depleted stocks, even if that hurts fishing communities such as Morro Bay.

"Unfortunately, stock assessments in general are an evolving science, and the Morro Bay area especially is data-poor, so neither party has hard evidence backing them up," Algert said.

Also contributing to the decline of the fishing industry is the high price of fuel. According to the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission, marine fuel prices increased fourfold from 1995 to 2005.

Cutting back the catch

What is clear is that the county's fishing industry has sustained a series of crippling setbacks, starting in 1983 when catch limits on some groundfish were first implemented. In 2002, the federal government declared Pacific groundfish to be in crisis.

Groundfish are a mainstay of San Luis Obispo County's commercial fishing industry. They are a group of about 80 mostly bottom-dwelling fish that includes rockfish and flatfish.

Rockfish are often labeled as Pacific red snapper on menus and in seafood stores. Flatfish, such as sole and halibut, are some of the most highly prized fish in the Pacific.

These fish were historically harvested mostly by trawlers — fishing boats that drag nets across the ocean floor.

Trawling creates several environmental problems because it can damage the ocean floor and scoop up all types of fish.

"Dragging can be really bad,"Morro Bay fisherman Ed Ewing said. "It can also be sustainable, if you do it right."

The Pacific Fisheries Management Council has ruled six groundfish species to be depleted and instituted a series of fishing restrictions and closures to protect them. These trawl restrictions heavily affected the county's fishing industry.

"Trawlers were the big tonnage producers in Morro Bay and Port San Luis," Pontarelli said.

The final blow came in 2005, when the council placed 3.8 million acres of ocean floor near the Central Coast off-limits to trawlers.

A year later, national environmental group The Nature Conservancy bought out the entire Morro Bay trawler fishing fleet—six fishing permits and four vessels—something no conservation group had ever done before.

Suddenly, The Nature Conservancy was a stakeholder in the Morro Bay fishing industry, said Michael Bell, who manages the conservancy's Central Coast marine program.

"When we bought them out, it may have accelerated their decline, but it was already happening," he said. "We wanted to see if we could establish a sustainable fishery on the Central Coast."

The Pacific's salmon fishery in recent years has experienced an even worse collapse. About three-quarters of Morro Bay fishermen will fish for salmon as far away as Alaska, if it is available, as a way to stay in business.

Creating new reserves

Last year, the state Department of Fish and Game established a series of marine reserves along the Central Coast in which 44 square miles of the near-shore coastline was either placed off-limits to fishing or severely restricted.

There is growing scientific evidence that marine reserves benefit fish populations in the long run, but they hurt fishermen in the short-term.

These reserves most directly affect sportfishing charter boats, as well as the live-fish fishery—a specialty market in which fish are caught, kept alive and shipped to restaurants in Los Angeles and the Bay Area.

Meanwhile, demand for seafood is steadily increasing.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration estimates that Americans consumed 4.9 billion pounds of seafood in 2006.

The average American eats about 17 pounds of seafood per year, up from 12.5 pounds in 1980, Pontarelli said.

This contradiction between rising demand for seafood and plummeting local catches leads many to worry that fishing will shift away from the United States—where it is highly regulated— to nations with little or no regulation such as China, Russia and South Korea.

Fishermen are hoping that the worst is over for their industry and a stable and sustainable fishery can be established on the Central Coast.

“Fish is not a love; it’s my life,” said David Kubiak, a second- generation Morro Bay fisherman. “Protecting our resources is a good thing, but over-regulation is counterproductive. It defeats the purpose and has opened the door for imported fish from unregulated waters.”

Increasingly, environmentalists agree.

“Closures aren’t enough,” Bell said. “Sustainable fishing is equally important.”

Reach David Sneed at 781- 7930.

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Sustainable Fishing

For Morro Bay fleet, the future relies on low-impact fishing

New model sees small amounts of fish caught on specialized gear and sold at premium prices

By David Sneed

Tues, Jul. 29, 2008

Ask someone on the Morro Bay waterfront what commercial fishing will look like 10 years from now and you'll get a lot of gloomy prognostications.

All say the industry is hanging on by its fingernails. But increasingly fishermen are beginning to believe that commercial fishing has a future.

"Those of us who are left in the industry won't go without a fight," said Morro Bay fisherman Mark Tognazzini.

They are also coming to realize that the fishing industry of the future will be very different than it is now. How fish are caught, how many of them are caught and how they are marketed to consumers is rapidly changing.

Gone are the days when large trawlers caught tons of fish and sold them at low prices.

In their place will be fishermen who use specialized gear to catch small amounts of fish and sell them for premium prices to consumers who want seafood that is sustainably and locally harvested.

Local efforts

Fishermen in San Luis Obispo County have embarked upon several programs that are intended to rebuild commercial fishing using this low-volume, high-value model.

The most important is a historic partnership among fishermen, environmentalists and the city of Morro Bay to upgrade the area's antiquated trawler fishing fleet.

Morro Bay recently received a $130,000 grant from the state Coastal Conservancy to prepare a new business plan for the waterfronts in Morro Bay and Port San Luis and conduct sea trials on low-impact fishing gear.

"The project addresses the real needs of California fisheries as we enter a new era of fisheries conservation and management, regulatory reform, new ways to catch fish sustainably and new markets for these fish," said Rod Fujita, a fisheries scientist with Environmental Defense, one of two groups involved in Central Coast fisheries issues.

The other group, The Nature Conservancy, now owns all of the trawl permits and vessels formerly owned by Morro Bay fishermen.

Michael Bell, Central Coast fisheries project manager with The Nature Conservancy, estimates that's enough to eventually keep eight to 12 fishermen on the water.

Currently, only one fisherman is using the conservancy's permits, but more will be needed to create steady supplies of seafood for local markets and restaurants.

The permits specifically require that any fish caught under the permits have to be landed at either Morro Bay or Port San Luis, thereby ensuring that the permits would benefit the local economy.

New gear needed

The first problem the partnership will tackle is to develop low-impact trawl gear.

Flatfish, such as halibut and sole, are notoriously hard to catch using anything but trawl nets because their mouths are so small they don't readily bite a baited hook and their wide, flat bodies aren't suitable for traps.

They are also looking at switching to hooks and lines and traps to catch a variety of rockfish, lingcod, spiny dogfish and sablefish, which have been targeted by trawlers.

The hope is that if a sustainable, low-impact fishing industry can be established, some areas of the ocean now closed to fishing could be reopened.

Sustainable, environmentally friendly techniques have another benefit.

They enable fishermen to produce a fresher, higher-quality catch than larger boats that stay out at sea longer. And this higher-quality fish can sell for more money.

Large trawls produce lower-quality catches because the fish at the bottom of the nets are crushed and beaten up. Unsightly fish are often only suitable for fish and chips and other cheaper seafood entrees.

The idea of developing sustainable fisheries has caught the attention of state resource managers.

Last year, the state established the California Fisheries Fund to provide low-interest loans to fishermen and communities to invest in innovative and sustainable fishing practices and business models, as is being done in Morro Bay.

The fund was established with a $2 million grant from the state Coastal Conservancy. The fund could grow to $17 million with public and private investments.

Meanwhile, research is under way to make fisheries management along the Central Coast more science-based.

Fishermen have long maintained that stock assessments are haphazard at best and result in catch limits that are too conservative.

Collaborative groups of local scientists, academics and fishermen including the San Luis Obispo Science and Ecosystem Alliance and the San Luis Obispo County Marine Interests Group have launched several fisheries research initiatives to fill in some of the scientific gaps and produce more accurate assessments.

This research also is intended to be a metric by which state fisheries authorities can gauge the effectiveness of the steps taken to protect fish stocks by monitoring how fish populations change over time.

During a recent visit to Morro Bay to get a briefing on the sustainable fisheries efforts there, Rep. Lois Capps, D-Santa Barbara, told fishermen that their groundbreaking efforts to reinvent themselves have impressed policymakers in Washington, D.C.

“You are on the cutting edge of managing fisheries in a different way than your parents and those who went before you could ever imagine,” she said.

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A struggle to stay afloat

With its once-lucrative catch now a sliver of its former self, Morro Bay is in the midst of a sea change. At stake are not only the city’s iconic image as a fishing village but its financial health as well.

By David Sneed and Sona Patel

Sun, Jul. 27, 2008

Morro Bay is facing a crisis. Its once-thriving fishing industry is teetering on the brink of extinction.

Ever-increasing regulations and restrictions, coupled with soaring fuel prices, have reduced the amount of fish caught locally by nearly 91 percent since 1990.

“When is enough, enough?” asked Mark Tognazzini, a fisherman, fish buyer and seafood restaurateur in Morro Bay. “Our backs are against the wall.”

So few fish are being caught that ice vendors, marine fuel businesses and tackle shops are closing — the very infrastructure needed to support the fishing industry.

As the industry has suffered, so have city finances. If the commercial fishing

boats lining the Embarcadero are lost for good, part of Morro Bay’s allure to tourists — and revenue—will be lost as well because it’s long been dependent on fishing to help pay for city services.

The city's financial picture has worsened steadily since 2002-03. Despite budget cuts, the city has spent more than it has taken into its general fund every year except one.

That was in 2005-06 after the city received an increase in property and hotel tax revenue along with a large one-time payment for its outfall lease for the Morro Bay Power Plant with then-owner Duke Energy.

The budget gap is projected to widen.

A recent economic consultant's report predicts that by fiscal year 2017-18, the city's spending would exceed revenue by nearly 15 percent if it continues its current service levels and if revenue keeps up with the pace of inflation.

And the cumulative deficits would add up to nearly $14 million by fiscal year 2017-18, according to the report.

This gloomy forecast has prompted city officials to evaluate operations and to look for new ways to generate revenue or reduce services further.

Already, Morro Bay officials have reduced staff by 13 percent since 2002-03—to about 107.

Of that, general-fund staffing —which excludes self-sufficient departments such as water, sewer and the harbor—is down 19 percent—to about 79 budgeted full-time equivalent positions.

In 2006, Morro Bay was one of four cities in San Luis Obispo County in which voters approved a half-cent sales tax rate increase. It generated about $650,000 in its first year.

The City Council also increased developer fees about 500 percent, bringing them on par with the rest of the county. Builders pay these fees to help pay for infrastructure improvements needed to handle growth.

In the wake of tighter budgets and shorter staffing levels, city officials earlier this year hired government consulting firm Management Partners Inc. of San Jose to re-evaluate operations.

A brief windfall

The city prospered financially during a short surge in revenue from the power plant during the state's electricity crisis from 2000 to 2001.

A chart showing projected general-fund revenue and expenses shows that city spending soared about 64 percent between 1998 and 2002.

Though spending dropped slightly immediately after 2002 and has stabilized in recent years, it's still 58 percent higher than a decade ago.

According to June 1999 budget documents, the sale of the power plant from Pacific Gas and Electric Co. to Duke Energy resulted in new revenue and made it possible for city leaders to add "badly needed staffing."

Most of the extra money received then was spent on buying real estate such as the former Flippo's Surfside Skate Harbor on Atascadero Road in October 2001. City leaders anticipated building a teen center there.

When a better location for the center was found at the former Paradise Island Fun Park across the street, the city decided to sell the former skate rink. The city made about $470,000 in profit when it sold the property in 2005.

In October 2002, the City Council approved the purchase of the property once home to Brannigan's Reef Restaurant and Bayview RV Park.

The restaurant site, which except for a brief stint hasn't served customers since 1995, has been eyed for years as a potential conference center. The former RV park is now a public parking lot.

City officials also used the extra money to replace critical equipment such as a police car, a pothole patch truck and a recreation and parks vehicle, setting aside the rest for reserves.

In recent years, however, as revenue tapered off, the city has been forced to start balancing its budget by using its reser ves and by reducing expenses, including eliminating several positions.

Tough recommendations

The consultant's report shows that if the city does not adopt any of the 34 recommendations to cut costs, general-fund expenses in the 2017-18 fiscal year could reach nearly $14 million while revenue would reach only about $12 million.

The study recommends saving money by contracting the city's police and fire services with the Sheriff's Department and County/Cal Fire, respectively.

City officials could also make immediate changes such as selling surplus property or levying new taxes on local residents, according to the report.

All taxes would require voter approval. Together, these would raise a few million dollars annually to pay for basic city services such as street maintenance and to replenish the general fund.

The Morro Bay Firefighters Association has already begun to address its need to respond to an increasing number of calls each year.

A committee made up of fire Chief Mike Pond, a member of the firefighters' association, two City Council members and a retired San Luis Obispo police chief has been developing a long-term goal for the city's fire services.

Part of that strategy includes the possibility of the city contracting its fire services.

Fire officials said the department wanted to develop ways to address the increased number of calls over the past decade while maintaining the same staffing levels since 1969.

Most of the department's calls are medical-related.

But the potential partnership also questions the city's willingness to lose a hometown fire department.

"The city of Morro Bay is in a difficult financial position and is unable to continue with status quo operations," according to the Management Partners report. "Many tough budgetary choices have already been made —and yet the financial picture continues to grow bleaker."

Reach David Sneed at 781- 7930 and Sona Patel at 781- 7924.

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Morro Bay fishermen giving new gear a try

Three commercial boats in Morro Bay are onboard with a federal program that's testing less-disruptive methods to catch bottom fish

By David Sneed
August 22, 2008

The Morning Light is one of three commercial fishing boats now operating out of Morro Bay under a new community-based fisheries management program.

The stern of the commercial fishing boat Morning Light moored in Morro Bay is stacked with gleaming galvanized metal tubs laden with fishing lines and hooks.

Fisherman Bill Blue is busy getting the boat ready for a day of fishing for sablefish and thornyheads in the deep waters off the Central Coast.

The Morning Light is one of three Morro Bay commercial fishing boats that have taken to the water in recent weeks as part of an innovative community-based fisheries management program.

The fishermen are using a new fishing permit issued by federal fisheries regulators that allows them to experiment with traps and hooks and line to catch bottom-dwelling species that have historically been caught by trawlers.

The other fishermen involved in the program are David Rose on the Nikki J and Roger Cullen aboard the Dorado.

Obtaining the exempted fishing permit from the National Marine Fisheries Service is part of a cooperative ef fort by fishermen, harbor officials and environmentalists to rebuild the Central Coast's commercial fishing fleet using less-disruptive harvest methods than those traditionally used.

A different battle

The area's commercial fishing fleet has been nearly destroyed in recent years by closures and ever-increasing regulations intended to protect a handful of deep-dwelling fish species, which are considered to be depleted.

"I'm willing to try something new and hope it works," Blue said. "We've been fighting a losing battle for the past 10 to 15 years."

If successful, the model could be adopted by fishing communities in other parts of the country, said Rod Fujita, a scientist with Environmental Defense, one of the environmental groups involved in the effort.

"It will provide the Pacific Fisheries Management Council with the real on-the-water experience they will need to develop new ways to fix the long-suf fering West Coast groundfish fishery," he said.

When Blue takes to the sea over the weekend, he will string lines of thousands of baited hooks along the ocean floor. He is mainly targeting sablefish, a fish popular in Japan that fishermen call black cod.

Long-lining for sablefish has some distinct environmental advantages over the traditional method of trawling. But long-lining also has some economic disadvantages that have, until now, made it unattractive, Blue said.

One of the goals of the cooperative fishing program is to experiment with ways to make long lines and traps more economical while preserving their environmental advantages.

"This will help secure what remains of California's fishing heritage and working harbors, promote a variety of improved fishing methods and ensure supplies of sustainably harvested seafood for consumers," said Rick Algert, Morro Bay's harbor director.

The main environmental damage caused by trawling is that it has a tendency to catch nontargeted fish, called bycatch. Deep-water long-lining has very little bycatch, Blue said.

Most of the bycatch are skates, a group of flat shark species similar to rays. Skates caught on the long lines are returned to the ocean alive.

The disadvantage of using long lines is that they are more labor intensive, relative to trawling. For every day a long liner spends fishing, he must spend two days in port untangling his lines and rebaiting his hooks.

“There’s a lot involved in this project,” Blue said. “It takes a lot of manpower.”

Another complicating factor is that an observer must come along on every trip. The observer inspects a percentage of the catch to make sure it is legal.

Blue also has video cameras mounted on his boat. They are turned on every time he activates the winch that allows him to deploy and retrieve the lines. The observers may be phased out if the cameras prove to be a reliable monitoring tool.

Another participant of the community-based fishing program is Morro Bay fisherman Ed Ewing, who is experimenting with lower impact trawl gear. A variety of fish, mostly flatfishes such as sole and flounder, can only be caught with trawlers because they will not bite on baited hooks.

Not all fishermen are convinced that the community-based fishing program is necessary.

One skeptic is Barry Cohen, a fish buyer in Port San Luis and a member of the groundfish advisory council for the Pacific Fisheries Management Council.

Cohen insists that the council does a good job of protecting the ocean’s resources. And he said that little is likely to be learned from the Morro Bay fishermen’s experimenting because fishermen already know the environmental benefits of using the various types of gear.

“Everyone is trying to do good, but trawlers are already fishing with the most sustainable gear,” he said.

Blue has been fishing commercially for the past 33 years. Before participating with the exempted permit, he fished primarily for Dungeness crab with pots. He also fished for sablefish with pots and trolled for salmon.

Though he’s cautious, Blue is optimistic that methods can be found to keep the fishing industry alive so he can continue fishing 20 more years.

“The program has good intentions,” he said. “I think it’s feasible to do this if we are allowed to go out and catch the fish.”

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