

LOUISIANA CRAB TASK FORCE MEETING MINUTES
June 23, 2011

Call to Order/Roll Call

The Crab Task Force meeting was called to order by Chairman Gary Bauer at 4:43 p.m.

A roll call was then made:

VOTING		NON-VOTING	
Gary Bauer	X	Mark Benfield	
Pete Gerica	X	Martin Bourgeois for Carl Britt	X
Dennis Landry		Melissa Daigle	
Roy Meek		Rusty Gaude	
Pete Peterson	X	Walter Keithly	
L.J. Sandras		David Lavergne	X
Pat Templet		Capt. Cliff Comeaux for Lt. Col. Jeff Mayne	X
Keith Watts	X		

Four voting members were present during roll call; however, no member quorum was present.

Mr. Pete Gerica commented that he did not receive any official notice of the meeting and happened to hear of the meeting through other sources. Mr. Martin Bourgeois responded by saying that cancellation of the June 11 meeting left little time for mailings and said notices were sent by email but LDWF would do better in following up with members on meeting notices.

Mr. Bourgeois introduced Ms. Trudy Luke and Mr. Rodney Parfait as potential members of the Task Force pending approval of their appointments. Ms. Luke would occupy the vacant crab shedder position and Mr. Parfait would occupy 1 of the 4 vacant hard crab fisherman positions. Both were invited to join the table with members. Mr. Glenn Cambre with the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals (LDHH) was also introduced and invited to join the table with members.

Public Comment

Chairman Gary Bauer opened the floor to public comment and members of the audience were asked to introduce themselves. Mr. Myron Prosperie, a member of the audience, spoke about bait shops selling undersize crabs and asked if this was legal. Captain Cliff Comeaux responded that this was illegal. Mr. Prosperie questioned why crabs are not as abundant as when he was younger. He stated that he sees very few crabs while shrimp trawling and recalled that in years past he would have to move to other areas in order to avoid large numbers of crabs. He also questioned how the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) assessed crab population status. Mr. Bourgeois responded that LDWF has recently completed a blue crab stock assessment utilizing fisheries independent trawl data, trip ticket and effort data as well as other data. The assessment was done as part of the blue crab industry’s efforts to gain Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) Certification. Mr. Mark Schexnayder provided further explanation of the MSC process. General discussion followed about influences of habitat changes, fishing practices, etc. on crab populations.

Adoption of Minutes and Agenda

Mr. Dennis Landry arrived at 5:05 p.m. making a total of five voting members present which constituted a quorum.

Mr. Keith Watts moved and Mr. Pete Peterson seconded that “the minutes and agenda be approved as written” – motion carried unanimously.

Senior Commercial Fishing License

Chairman Bauer introduced Ms. Janis Landry, LDWF Licensing Manager. Mr. Peterson pointed out that crab fishermen who qualify for and receive a senior commercial fisherman’s license are issued a number different from the commercial fisherman’s license number they have operated under for years. The problem is that the numbered tag required on crab traps must be changed if the license number changes which is a difficult, costly and time-consuming process. Ms. Landry responded that a different number, meaning their original commercial license number could be assigned to senior commercial fishermen but only upon request and it would be best if it were limited to only crab fishermen. This would allow licensed senior commercial fishermen to retain the same unique license number issued to them in earlier license years, thus avoiding the need to change trap tags. Mr. Watts added that this information needs to get out to others and

suggested signage be posted near the licensing counter to alert crab fishermen to this option. Ms. Landry said she would accommodate these requests.

Blue Crab Processing and Solid Waste Disposal

Chairman Bauer pointed out that all solid waste generated from his processing facility is brought to a landfill for disposal and cited the potential benefits of recycling these wastes into useful products, thereby reducing disposal costs while making processing more “green”. He cited that his disposal costs approximate \$2800 a month. A firm visited Chairman Bauer’s processing facility and conducted an analysis indicating that wastes contained enough protein to be useful and he felt that this should be something worth pursuing. Mr. Landry questioned who engineers and develops these processes which generated additional discussion. All members agreed for the need. No further discussion followed and no action was taken.

Dr. Julie Anderson updated members on the status of the derelict crab trap removal program, NFWF grant and plans for upcoming trap removal projects. Immediate plans include selection of trap closure areas for the 2012 cleanup which would need to be presented to the Wildlife and Fisheries Commission at its September meeting.

Whitespot Disease

Mr. Bourgeois advised members that Dr. John Hawke with the LSU Veterinary School and Aquatic Diagnostic Lab was unable to attend but Dr. Hawke provided a PowerPoint presentation summarizing whitespot disease. Rather than presenting these slides, Mr. Bourgeois briefly reviewed the contents of the presentation and cited mass mortalities associated with whitespot disease in shrimp ponds in Asia, South and Central America and Texas and more recently in crawfish ponds in Louisiana.

Reports of Blue Crab Mortalities and Laboratory Findings

Likewise, Mr. Bourgeois advised members that Dr. Hawke also provided a PowerPoint presentation summarizing the findings of crab samples provided to LSU Aquatic Diagnostic Lab by LDWF and Louisiana Sea Grant biologists. These samples were collected from commercial fishermen, crab shedders and crab docks located in Dulac, Montegut, Delacroix Island, Chauvin and Yscloskey from Mar 17 – May 24, 2011. In summary, all crabs tested negative for PAH and WSSV (white spot virus). Many specimens displayed gills heavily infested with *Lagenophrys callinectes* which causes brownish to blackish discoloration of gills. *L. callinectes* specifically infests blue crabs and is usually an indicator of other problems that weaken or slow growth and molting rates. Blockage of gill surfaces interferes with respiration and these stresses may lead to death. Crabs sampled from Yscloskey had advanced shell disease caused by *Vibrio spp* with barnacles and algae growing on the carapace. Factors resulting in slow crab growth rates in the spring of 2011 are not known but cooler than normal water temperatures could have been responsible. Although bacterial pathogens were found, they were not consistently isolated. Tissue was saved and may be tested for other possible viruses.

A general discussion followed on why some areas have few crabs, particularly female crabs since last June. Mr. Landry commented that blue crab populations in freshwater areas look fine and these areas are producing more quality crabs than saltwater areas. Mr. Gerica noted that crabs are skinnier than usual.

Dr. Julie Anderson said that she has submitted two grant proposals to EPA and a BP consortium to study long-term effects of the oil spill on crabs. No further discussion followed and no action was taken.

Trade Adjustment Assistance for the Blue Crab Resource

Chairman Bauer deferred this agenda item until the next meeting due to Ms. Melissa Daigle’s unavailability.

Impacts of Freshwater Flooding on the Blue Crab Resource

Chairman Bauer commented that freshwater associated with the opening of the Bonnet Carre spillway usually impacts the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain but this year about 25% of the Lake remained salty. Mr. Peterson added that some crab dealers were buying as much as 200 boxes of crabs per day but since the opening it has dropped to 60 boxes/day. An unidentified member of the audience commented that they have left the Lake completely and algal blooms are present. Chairman Bauer added that there is no amount of crabs currently available in the Lake and these are mostly female crabs. Others commented that they are seeing dead crabs in traps, that the last front caused the tide to fall like a big flash and they are also moving their traps out of the Lake. Chairman Bauer suggested that things within Lake Pontchartrain may not change until fall. Mr. Landry cautioned that the last thing we want to see is a big increase in crab production due to market conditions caused by the increased availability of blue crabs in North Carolina owing to regulations banning winter crab dredging. He cited the added costs of freight shipments to traditional markets on the east coast and stressed the need to recapture these markets noting that these crabs are not as large as ours. Concerning crab imports, Mr. Landry added that Venezuela is a big competitor and produces through August. No further discussion followed and no action was taken.

Exports of Live Blue Crab

Chairman Bauer discussed the importance of finding new and non-traditional markets for blue crabs. He explained that he

was approached about shipping live blue crabs to China adding that China has the fastest growing middle class economy in the world. If Dungeness crab can be shipped live why can't we figure out how to successfully ship live blue crabs to overseas markets? Mr. Rene LeBreton with the Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board (LSPMB) added that the Board has hired several public relations firms which should help improve marketing efforts. Chairman Bauer commented that Chinese markets will pay a premium price for live female crabs it's just a matter of figuring out methods and processes to successfully ship these crabs. Mr. Gerica stated that Daniel Edgar once shipped live crabs to China but couldn't recall what the problems were.

Mr. Gerica moved and Mr. Peterson seconded that Mr. Rusty Gaude' with LA Sea Grant be directed to work on the development of methods for successful shipments of live crabs to overseas markets. The motion carried unanimously.

Status of Derelict Crab Trap Removal and Crab Promotion and Marketing Accounts

Mr. Bourgeois advised members that a copy of these balances is found in their meeting folder. He reviewed these figures with members but when questioned about the meaning of encumbered, pre-encumbered and uncommitted funds, he could provide little explanation. Mr. David Lavergne was asked but was not completely certain what these meanings were. Mr. Bourgeois commented that approximately \$47,000 was used to fund a trap cleanup in a portion of Plaquemines parish earlier in the year.

Mr. Casey Bourne, a member of the audience asked how many traps had been removed during the 2011 cleanup. Mr. Bourgeois responded that the total was approximately 1200 traps and that the cleanup was performed by an independent contractor. He explained that in recent years, LDWF performed cleanups with little to no assistance from volunteers and LDWF had no plans to conduct a trap cleanup in 2011 due to staff commitments with other projects such as expanded fisheries independent sampling, fish tissue collections, NRDA sampling, etc. However, Plaquemines parish government formally requested that LDWF address trap cleanup in a portion of Plaquemines parish west of the Mississippi River including those waters within Bay Jimmy which are closed to commercial and certain recreational activities.

Mr. Bourne questioned why commercial crab fishermen were not used to do the cleanup. It was explained that since oil still remained within portions of this area and the potential risk of exposure, it was best to have these services contracted. Mr. Bourne suggested that commercial fishermen should be hired in future trap cleanups.

Mr. Peterson moved and Mr. Watts seconded that members be brought up to date on the derelict crab trap removal and crab promotion and marketing accounts and how funds are used. The motion carried unanimously.

Update on MSC Certification of the Blue Crab Fishery

Mr. Schexnayder explained that the blue crab fishery is undergoing a full assessment by a third party contractor. A peer reviewed stock assessment of the fishery has been completed and the contractor has scheduled site visits for Aug 29-31. He added that the full assessment evaluates nineteen criteria and that we are approximately half-way through the process. Mr. Schexnayder reported that bycatch of diamondback terrapins in crab traps was stated as a concern in the pre-assessment report and methods to reduce bycatch may have to be implemented. Mr. LeBreton suggested that the Task Force consider potential regulations such as the use of turtle excluder devices and jute string in traps and limited entry to counter these concerns and gain certification of the fishery. No further discussion followed and no action was taken.

Indirect Effects of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill on the Blue Crab Industry

This agenda item was skipped upon the recommendation of Chairman Bauer.

Task Force Vacancies and Recruitment Efforts

Mr. Bourgeois reintroduced Ms. Luke and Mr. Parfait as prospective task force members representing a soft crab shedder and hard crab fisherman, respectively. He stated that with their appointments, there would still remain three vacancies for hard crab fishermen. Mr. Gerica questioned if LDWF had been contacted by a Mr. Alphonso from St. Bernard parish and Mr. Bourgeois responded that he had not been contacted by Mr. Alphonso. Mr. Peterson suggested the name of a fellow Lake Pontchartrain crab fisherman as a potential member. However, he acknowledged that appointment of another Lake Pontchartrain representative may conflict with certain provisions in statute that require membership to represent diverse geographic areas of the state to the extent practicable. No further discussion followed and no action was taken.

Travel Reimbursement for Task Force Members

Chairman Bauer stated that he approached two legislators requesting sponsorship of a bill that would allow members to be reimbursed for travel expenses for meeting attendance. Ms. Daigle had developed a draft bill which would allow members to claim these expenses but Chairman Bauer added he could find no bill sponsors even though funding for reimbursement currently exists. He suggested that the task force bring it back for sponsorship in next year's regular legislative session.

Mr. Peterson suggested that Mr. Bourgeois ask the LDWF legal section about the possibility of travel reimbursement through the agency. No further discussion followed and no action was taken.

H2-B Visas and Labor Issues

Chairman Bauer stated that the Immigration Service is changing rules concerning visas without going through Congress and making things increasingly more difficult to use emigrant labor. He discussed an immigrant standard which is utilized across the board and that only 64,000 H2-B visas are available annually and small business are having great difficulty competing with large corporations for available visas. Mr. Landry added that the Immigration Service wants to adopt a standard wage rate of \$10.35 per hour for emigrant labor and wants business who use H2-B workers to sign contracts with these workers guaranteeing them three-quarters of wages regardless when a season ends. He also commented that current minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour. No further discussion followed and no action was taken.

Status of HB 584

Chairman Bauer stated that HB 584 by Representative Mert Smiley would have eliminated the Crab Task Force along with a number of other state boards and commissions. With the help of others, Representative Smiley withdrew the Crab Task Force from the bill. Chairman Bauer wasn't sure how the task force was included in the bill and encouraged LDWF to continue submitting required documents in order to avoid having the task force listed as inactive in the future. Mr. Glenn Cambre commented that this type of bill designed to purge inactive boards and commissions has routinely been sponsored by Representative Smiley.

Chairman Bauer described a growing movement to create a National Seafood Board funded through tariff collections and the state legislature has supported this movement through a resolution (HCR 142) adopted by the legislature and sponsored by Representative Greg Cromer. Chairman Bauer also mentioned SB 81 which creates the Louisiana Buy Local Purchase Incentive Program to promote the consumption of Louisiana agricultural products by granting incentive payments to certain restaurant establishments for purchases of Louisiana agricultural products including seafood products. No further discussion followed and no action was taken.

Crab Education Day Planning

Chairman Bauer suggested that this item be discussed at the next meeting and education day should take place in September or October.

Mr. Landry brought up the topic of increasing the minimum size of escape rings in crab traps and asked those present if they used a larger ring size than the current 2 and 5/16" minimum size. Mr. Parfait commented that larger ring sizes retain larger crabs and reduces culling time and most present agreed. Mr. Landry added that factory crabs are only worth 30 cents/pound while Chairman Bauer commented that factory crabs in his area are selling for 40 cents/pound. Mr. Watts stated that we shouldn't change the law but keep the use of larger ring size as an option for fishermen. He further added that this discussion was not listed as an agenda item and had been discussed in previous task force meetings.

Mr. Peterson moved to adjourn the meeting which was seconded by Mr. Watts. The motion carried unanimously and the meeting was adjourned at 7:13 pm.