Brevard shrimpers: Coral plan could crush industry

Boats must offload or detour under proposal

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Written by Jim Waymer

About a half-dozen shrimpers are sitting in on a meeting at the Cocoa Beach Hilton Cocoa Beach Oceanfront to discuss the possibility of enlarging an area off Brevard that's closed to rock shrimping.

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council staff says it's early in the process and that the council may chose to not even pursue the the larger closed area during its March meeting.

"This is a document that hasn't yet developed," Anna Martin, a SAFMC staff member, said as she presented maps of how the area closed to rock shrimping might grow. "At this stage, the council members want input from you," Martin said.

Shrimpers know where the coral is and don't want to ruin their nets dragging them over the brittle deep-sea reefs.

But federal regulators plan to expand an off-limits deep-sea coral area anyway, closing waters shrimpers have crossed for decades.

"This would just be another nail in the coffin of the commercial fishing industry in
Port Canaveral,” said Laurilee Thompson, owner of Dixie Crossroads Seafood Restaurant in Titusville.

Shrimpers don’t fish in the area where the coral is. But the proposed regulation would prohibit even possessing rock shrimp in the waters over the coral, even if the shrimp were caught elsewhere. That would force shrimpers to either offload elsewhere, such as Jacksonville, or make an extensive detour to avoid passing over the coral as they return to Port Canaveral.

Fishing for or possessing rock shrimp is prohibited within the current closed area, which runs from about Cape Canaveral to Fort Pierce. The proposal would extend that area north to near St. Augustine.

“Boats are not going to run all the way up close to St. Augustine and bring their shrimp down again,” Thompson said. “They are not going to waste very expensive fuel or their very valuable time.”

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council plans six public meetings this month to discuss the change, including one today in Cocoa Beach. After gathering public comment, the council will consider the change at its meeting March 5 to 9 in Savannah.

Shrimpers already go to great lengths to avoid dragging their nets over coral.

“Whenever they hit coral, it’s very, very costly in down time and damaged gear, and from a safety standpoint,” said Mike Merrifield, co-owner of Wild Ocean Market, which has stores in Titusville and Port Canaveral.
John Reed, a researcher at Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute at Florida Atlantic University, first discovered the Oculina reefs off Fort Pierce in the 1970s. “They are essential fish habitat for grouper and snapper and other important fin-fish species,” Reed said.

He’s seen firsthand from submersibles the destruction shrimp nets have inflicted on reefs that took hundreds of years to form. “It had looked like a bulldozer had gone through,” Reed said.

The new proposed protected area infringes on spots shrimpers have fished for 45 years, Thompson said.

Regulators don’t need to expand the protected area, she said. They should instead use existing technology to track shrimpers via satellite to enforce the current protected zone. Through that technology, they can tell how fast vessels are going, and therefore whether boats are going slow enough to drag a shrimp net.

“They know exactly where each boat is 24 hours a day,” Thompson said.

Regulators could allow some sort of corridor through which shrimpers could legally cross the closed area to deliver their catches, as long as they maintained a speed too fast to drag their nets.

“We have no problem with them closing the coral,” Thompson said. “We don’t drag in the coral.”

Thompson said the proposal goes against the assurances regulators made when the original Oculina Banks coral reef protected area was set up a decade ago.
“We were promised that they would not
take away historical rock shrimping
grounds, and that’s exactly what they’ve
proposed to do,” Thompson said.

“We’re trying to run businesses and keep
people working,” she said. “We don’t even
have time to defend ourselves against this
stuff.”

**Expanded closed area**

The South Atlantic Fishery Management
Council will have a public meeting about
new shrimping rules from 4 to 7 p.m.
today at Hilton Cocoa Beach Oceanfront,
1550 N. Atlantic Ave., Cocoa Beach. Call

View the proposal: safmc.net/LinkClick.
.aspx?fileticket=ngMWJ+Uk420%
3d&tabid=624