NEW ORLEANS — Proposed closure of the Gulf of Mexico to shrimping from May through July would severely affect the South Louisiana economy, testified bankers, shrimpers and representatives of utility companies on Wednesday.

Thirty five to 50 percent of Louisiana’s shrimp catch comes in those months, one banker told the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council. The hardship caused to that industry would pour over to the rest of the economy, he said.

An overflow of speakers at the council’s public hearing Wednesday forced the group to postpone discussing and voting on the closure. The council will take up that and other controversial questions, including a severe cutback in the allowable catch of red snapper and requirements that shrimpers use fish excluder devices, on Thursday.

The council then will make recommendations to the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Commerce on what regulations to issue.

The huge meeting room was packed Wednesday with shrimpers who wore blue and white caps and blue T-shirts that warned of their unemployment plight if their industry is too tightly regulated.
Many of them booed when a red snapper fisherman bemoaned his fate of diminishing catches and complained of juvenile snapper being killed in shrimp nets.

"You can't expect me to suffer more than I have," the fisherman said. "I have already suffered while a net is dragging the bottom killing baby fish. The Gulf of Mexico is not an unlimited source of fish."

But shrimpers said closing their season from May through July would put them out of business, and requiring them to put fish excluder devices (FEDs) would hinder their productivity without any proof that the snapper pollution would be helped.

"Before you do anything about bycatch, you'd better find out how big of a problem bycatch is," said Tee John Miailevich, a spokesman for Louisiana shrimpers. Bycatch is the catch of unwanted species.

"Take a course to protect people and jobs," he told the council. "Manage the resource in a socially acceptable manner." Shrimpers are willing to take action to protect troubled species at times and in places where it is necessary, but don't support blanket regulations, he said.

Some suggested that juvenile snapper are more likely to be taken in specific areas, in deeper waters, at certain times of the year and regulations could be tailored to fit the situation.

Perhaps there could be a temporary closure of the season during certain times of the year in areas where large percentages of juvenile snappers are netted, said Sonya Girard of the Organization of Louisiana Fishermen.

"Closure is not acceptable during the height of shrimp season," said Bill Chauvin, representing shrimp processors.

"We can't survive a closure for the entire month of July," said Harris Lassellne of the Texas Shrimpers Association.

Pollution, dynamiting at offshore oil sites and the causes for dead zones off the mouth of the Mississippi River should be investigated for their impact on juvenile snapper, he said.

"I think pollution has a big part to do with reef fish management," said charter boat captain Ken Beard. "Reefs are dying" from pollution.

But Beard said the problem of shrimp nets killing juvenile snapper also is significant.

Because data indicates diminishing snapper populations, the council is proposing the three month closure of the shrimp season, use of FEDS and the reduction of the commercial quota on snapper from 3.1 million pounds to 1 million pounds a year. It also has proposed lowering the recreational bag limit from seven snapper to two.