Louisiana’s commercial seafood industry has always faced challenges, but new economic factors, stiffer competition and market changes are making it harder than ever to stay afloat.

By Jeremy Alford

Conery Durand fidgeted slightly in his seat when the question was asked. Dried mud from his boots fell on the floor as he ran a hand over his reddened face and golden beard. Conery, 33, had stayed relatively quiet until then, shifting from one foot to another while his older brother fielded queries. But it was his turn. “So, how long have you been in the seafood business?” His answer came short and clipped and without eye contact: “Never really did anything else, I guess.”

At Teche Valley Seafood in St. Martinville, harvesting crawfish is a family tradition and way of life for the Durands. Six brothers, three sisters and their father run the business. Before she passed away, mom bundled the books. Another generation of Durands coming up — sons, daughters, cousins — want in as well, but they’re unlikely to inherit the same business as the original siblings. “It ain’t like it used to be,” says Jeff, 43, who appears to be the chosen spokesman for the clan. “Things look dismal right now, but we’ll survive. We always have.”

A slop of the brothers and one of the sisters are gathered in their storefront, discussing things that no longer exist. Peeling tables previously cluttered the rear of the building, but the Durands no longer process crawfish — it became too costly more than a decade ago when cheap imports began flooding the marketplace. The Durands are now confined to live crawfish sales only. Hopes ran high in 1997 when the U.S. Department of Commerce levied duties on the foreign product, but that excitement has dwindled. The resulting money for domestic processors has not been a huge help.

A little further down Bayou Teche, in the shadow of the Durand family business, is the Evangeline Oak, named for the epic poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The story of tortured passion — where Evangeline travels a long and hard road searching for her lover Gabriel — was even used by former Gov. Huey P. Long to describe the unanswered needs of Louisianans.
Commercial seafood is at a turning point right now and will be for the next four or five years. ... In terms of the economic plight, in terms of its viability, it has never been more critical than it is now. This is a make or break thing.

—John Roussel, assistant secretary of the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

Its metaphor of despair and hope is not lost on the Durand family, or the entire commercial seafood industry in Louisiana. Certain factors are jeopardizing this culture, and many are in search of a saving grace. In Batture, shrimpmen are selling their boats due to skyrocketing foreign product and unpredictable weather. Oystermen in Houma fear the worst as the federal government keeps a watchful eye on oyster-related diseases and ponder placing their price on the endangered species list. Crab processors in Abbeville are in desperate need of labor as they watch domestic prices skyrocket. In New Orleans, along Bayou Savage, commercial fisherman are still steaming mud over their severely limited catches, as state law prohibits them from harvesting redfish, and trout are confined to a red and seed fishery.

Meanwhile, demand for fresh seafood remains high. Fried seafood platters continue to be best sellers, even if they include crab from Venezuela, and tourists come in search of the state’s famous blackened redfish, although it is illegal to cook and sell it when it comes from Louisiana waters. Fifty years ago, consumers didn’t care where their seafood came from, mainly because they already knew. But today, it’s a different story. Nearly all of the fisheries have launched marketing campaigns stressing the quality of their product, asking people to eat Louisiana shrimp, oysters and crab. Those pleas, however, might not be enough.

John Roussel, assistant secretary of the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, says demand is the one area that truly shows promise, but it is deceiving. One might think that domestic producers would benefit from the demand and prices would work in the favor of fishermen, yet that hasn’t happened. Rather, foreign competitors have filled the growing supply side. That’s a major contributor to the overall challenge and a single piece of a troubling puzzle.

“Commercial seafood is at a turning point right now and will be for the next four or five years,” Roussel says. “It has always had challenges, going back my 26 years with the department, but it seems like in terms of the economic plight, in terms of its viability, it has never been more critical than it is now. This is a make or break thing.”

Fishermen and processors and dealers are clinging to hope. If there is a solution, they are resolved to find it. Even Evangeline eventually found her lover Gabriel in Longfellows’ poem, although aged and living in a poor house. But she kept searching with a determination that workers with nets, lines and boats are displaying today. For Louisiana’s fisheries to survive, those involved will have to find a way to change with the times.

**BLUES ON THE HALF-SHELL**

Sitting high above Canal Street in New Orleans, a group of oyster fishermen and processors are gathered in a boardroom to hear the latest industry news. The surroundings are a far cry from the private leases and public seed grounds they fish in coastal waters, but this is a central gathering point. The Louisiana oyster industry supports more than 10,000 jobs, with the top producers residing in Terrebonne, Plaquemines and St. Bernard parishes.

The agenda is lengthy, and emotional speeches make the meeting of the Louisiana Oyster Task Force run long. At the epicenter is the chairman, Mike Voisin of Houma. Behind a set of rounded eyeglasses and a friendly smile, Voisin can get overly technical with details when needed or smoothly transition into layman’s terms to suit his audience. A fixture around the state Capitol for years, you can rest assure that if there’s an oyster-related law being considered, Voisin is in the mix. And much like the Jimmy Buffet song, he is the son of a son of a sailor, or more appropriately, a fisherman.

The most pressing issue is a complex one. The task force is busy mounting a campaign to keep the eastern oyster, Louisiana’s primary species, off the federal government’s endangered species list. The National Marine Fisheries Service, a division of the U.S. Commerce Department that deals with fishing issues, is considering a petition that would categorize the oyster as “endangered" or “threatened.”

The petition largely focuses on the Atlantic Coast, more specifically the Chesapeake Bay, where eastern oysters have been plagued by disease and pollution. But since Louisiana’s eastern oyster could potentially be a subspecies, it could also be included. If this happens, the federal government could shut down an industry that has thrived in south Louisiana for generations. "This is a piece of dynamite that has its fuse lit, and you don’t know how long the fuse is," Voisin says. "It could go off at any time." Any decision by the federal government on the issue could be disastrous, impacting recreational fishing, shrimp trawling, transportation and oil work with new regulations. LOTF estimates that the Gulf Coast produces nearly 70 percent of the nation’s eastern oysters, and Louisiana harvests more than half. Additionally, this homegrown industry has a nearly $287 million economic impact on the state.

The task force is preparing to dip into its own coffers to bankroll a counter-information campaign and is drafting a letter to the fisheries service outlining landings from recent seasons that display Louisiana’s abundant eastern oyster crops. Early estimates indicate the report should bode well for the industry. Fishermen harvested 27.5 million pounds of oyster meat during 2002 and 2003, which is more than 10,000 pounds more than a decade ago and roughly 2 million pounds greater than the same period in the early ’90s.

Still, the threat remains. Most recently, U.S. Rep. Bobby Jindal, R-Metairie, introduced legislation to amend the Endangered Species Act to allow regional classification of the eastern oyster. The bill would essentially allow oysters in the Gulf of Mexico to be considered separately from oysters in the Chesapeake Bay, where population numbers have been dwindling.

“This loophole in the Endangered Species Act threatens to decimate that industry through a shortsighted protection effort,” Jindal says. “Though attempts to protect Chesapeake oysters should be supported, without the legislation I proposed, Louisiana and the Gulf states stand to suffer greatly. We can not allow that to happen.”

The legislation has been referred to the Committee on Resources, where both Jindal and U.S. Rep. Charlie Melancon, D-Napoleonville, hold seats. An initial hearing was held last week, but a final decision on the issue will not likely come until mid-January, according to Voisin.

In the meantime, Voisin and others have plenty more to worry about, like disease. It’s no secret that oysters can sometimes make people ill, or kill them. But a lesser-known caveat is the federal government is cracking down in a major way. Over the past 20 years, dozens of deaths and illnesses have been attributed to Vibrio vulnificus, a bacteria that thrives in saltwater. The at-risk group is relatively small, impacting people with liver problems. Furthermore, only 1- to-10,000 from this group has to be
Thirty-three-year-old Conny Durand has always worked for his family’s crawfish business.

cornered, says Voisin.

The federal government has directed the industry to decrease such cases by 40 percent over the next year, and 60 percent by 2008. Voisin says the deaths and illnesses have already been reduced by 47 percent in Louisiana alone. But if the state doesn’t meet the 60 percent threshold in four years, there’s a possibility fishermen could be charged with stricter standards implemented.

There is a somewhat simple solution: a high-pressure treatment process like the one Voisin uses at his Motivait Seafoods processing plant in Houma. But that machinery can cost up to $1 million, well out of reach of most in the industry. As such, the focus has been on educating the public.

Other challenges, such as oyster leases being destroyed by coastal restoration projects and fish eating oyster crops, have been partly solved in recent years through legislation. As for marketing efforts, the old standby is being used. Voisin contends everything you’ve ever heard about oysters and sex is absolutely true, and their marketing campaign wouldn’t dare gloss over such a nugget. "Hey, everyone knows oysters will improve your love life," he says with a laugh.

TRAWLING TROUBLED WATERS

While other interest groups were trying to dodge taxes during this year’s legislative session, Louisiana shrimpers were actually fighting to impose a fee increase on themselves. Furthermore, it was the second time in so many years that shrimpers asked the Legislature to boost the cost of their licenses. Wanting to be over-taxed is an odd position to take, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

The additional monies are needed to help shrimpers keep their battle against foreign imports alive. The International Trade Commission declared earlier this year that tariffs should be imposed on six nations accused of “dumping” shrimp on the domestic market, including Brazil, China, Ecuador, India, Thailand and Vietnam. (Dumping is an illegal act in which a foreign product is sold below the cost of production.) The trade action provides shrimping communities throughout the southeast United States with hope that the tariffs will prevent further market distortions and will allow fishermen to get back to business.

Originally filed by the Southern Shrimp Alliance, a trade group representing shrimpers and processors from six states, the lawsuit proved that dumping occurred in the United States and caused considerable damage to the wild-caught shrimp industry.

It was a big step in squelching imports from these six countries, which provides the United States with about 87 percent of all consumable shrimp in conjunction with foreign nations. But the battle is far from over. The foreign nations involved have filed appeals, which will cost more money to defend. There will also be federal reporting requirements so local fishermen and processors can potentially receive payments from the so-called Byrd Amendment, which redistributes the tariff payments to those impacted by the dumping.

Most in the industry are aware of the challenge and are willing to shoulder the burden, even if it means shelling out more money in a fiscally depressing time. "We have to pay the bill as one industry," says Kim Chauvin, acting president of the Louisiana Shrimp Industry Coalition, a group of shrimpers and processors centralized in the Terrebonne-Lafourche region. The running total for the entire trade action could possibly cost Louisiana upwards of $1 million. Other states involved with the effort are also putting up a share.

Of the money Louisiana will have to pay, only $350,000 in legal payments has been paid to date. Another $640,000 is being raised through fee increases on the commercial and recreational shrimping industries, and that too will go to the case. Barring any unexpected happenings, these fees should receive the shortfall the state was facing earlier this year. While the main goal of the petition was to grant some relief for domestic shrimping interests, an underlying priority was to clean money for them from the Byrd Amendment. But Deborah Long, a spokesperson for the Southern Shrimp Alliance, says the pending appeals have caused a kink in the process. "Chances are those funds will not be available for this year," she says.

A.J. Fabre, president of the Louisiana Shrimp Association, has 1,500 members statewide, says even if the money was available for the current year, most in the industry would be cut out because live shrimp harvesters are not eligible. "Winning the suit is a major step, but because the fresh shrimp is excluded," he says, "it's because the foreign markets aren't bringing in fresh product. They're bringing in frozen shrimp and that's where the focus is. Even our guys with freezers on their boats are in a gray area right now. Only the processors stand to benefit in a small way.

Others have a different opinion, and the federal government has invited both fishermen and processors to apply for Byrd money this year. In the long run, though, it may not even matter, some argue. Historically, protectionism never seems to work out for those pushing it. Chinese crawfish can still be purchased in Louisiana, despite a similar suit during the 90s, and the same point can be made about domestic salmon interests, who took on Chile importers and won eight years ago.

The overall challenge is daunting at best. The International Trade Commission estimates domestic shrimpers only supply the national marketplace with 12 percent of its consumable shrimp. Many believe the fiscal solution is finding new and exciting ways to market fresh domestic shrimp.

Enter the "Wild American Shrimp" campaign, which focuses on "certified" southern shrimp. The goal is to create a niche culinary market like those enjoyed by Alaskan salmon, Maine lobster and Angus beef. It also seeks to differentiate wild shrimp from the cheaper pond varieties. Named Legasse, one of Orleans’ most popular chefs, signed on as spokesman for the effort earlier this year, but the government-funded campaign got off to a bumpy start.

Some shrimpers have recently argued in a very public way — that Legasse’s product does not live up to the "Wild American Shrimp" logo due to broken tails, partial pieces and black spots. The chef’s spokesperson, Mimn Rice-Duncan, issued a statement only saying the company is committed to providing "high-quality products." The hullabaloo caused Louisiana shrimpers to call for their own program, targeting only Bayou State shrimp. Louisiana State University is developing such a certification program, and could be online in the near future.

FEELING THE PINCH

While seafood producers around the state are no stranger to battling low-quality imported product, Louisiana’s blue-crab industry has traditionally fallen between the cracks. Foreign competition...
If we don’t get some new and creative minds in the Legislature after the 2007 elections, some people that are willing to work with biology rather than social and political ideas, I don’t think we can save the fishery. If we stay the same, there’s no way in hell we’re going to survive.

— Pete Gerica, president of the Lake Pontchartrain Fishermen’s Association and chairman of the Louisiana Seafood Management Council

The situation in this area has deteriorated enough in recent years to allow the crab industry a breather or two, or out-of-state markets for live crab have surfaced as a viable way for processors to diversify. The Louisiana crab industry is one of the state’s largest seafood sectors and values around $90 million annually by the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

But new statistics released by the Louisiana Crab Task Force earlier this year show the industry is finally feeling the pinch. The only answer, according to some in the industry, may be an anti-dumping petition, a tool that is becoming increasingly common in the modern culture of Louisiana seafood.

Jerald Horst, a fisheries specialist with LSU, helped compile the report, which indicates imported pasteurized crab meat has increased in Louisiana by 94 percent from 2000 to 2004. But it’s not the warning sign that has industry insiders concerned.

The importation of fresh product for the first two quarters of last year was 20 percent higher than the same time span in 2003. While Indonesia, Ecuador and Thailand have seen price increases, Venezuelan prices have dropped by more than 21 percent over the past year, and the decline is expected to continue. And that’s troubling because Venezuela is Louisiana’s primary competition when it comes to crabmeat.

Dennis Landry, owner of Crabs LLC in Larose, deals with crabmeat everyday and has personally felt the impact of Venezuela. “When Venezuela shut down, our markets go back up,” he says. “When Venezuela comes back on, you might as well shut it down. Basically, it’s the same kind of crab we have here. It looks the same and almost tastes the same. The stuff from other countries, you can tell the difference with that.”

Jim Rich, a member of the Louisiana Crab Task Force and owner of Cartilage Wholesale near Abbeville, says the push for an anti-dumping petition is still in the early stages and is far from gaining momentum. “One of the biggest problems nationwide is the crab processing industry has gotten so weak that there’s no money to put a petition together,” Rich says. “We can’t seem to get money from the government, and it’s just growing stagnant.”

Horst and others estimate it could cost more than $1 million to file a petition with the International Trade Commission. State officials say the industry itself will have to come up with part of the money, as shrimpmen recently did.

Rich fears it may be too late for that. Over the past decade, the number of processors has dropped from the mid-30s to about a dozen. And on the front line, the price per pound for jumbo lump meat has gone from a maximum of $20 to about $14 during the same period. Crabmeat from Venezuela is usually about $4 to $5 cheaper.

The goal now, Rich says, is to combine efforts with crabbers and processing plants in Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia and Maryland.

Another challenge that has cropped up in recent years is the ongoing struggles with labor. Rich and other processors traditionally bring in workers from Mexico. But other industries, such as farming and construction, need seasonal labor as well.

The stiff competition left many crab processors empty-handed when the visa program ended in early January — just 12 weeks after the start date and months ahead of schedule.

An emergency fix is now pending debate in Congress, which could lead to a two-tier overhaul. “These workers have been coming here for years, but many plants were unable to get them when the visas ran out earlier this year,” Rich says. “I just hope Congress can alleviate this problem.”

**THE MUDBUG MASSACRE**

A crawfish season in Louisiana essentially runs about 12 months, hopping over two consecutive years. But harvesting only takes place for seven to nine of these months, and the length can vary.

More than any other factor facing crawfish harvesters, weather is the 800-pound gorilla. But there’s only so much a man can do to battle Mother Nature. Fishermen just pray for a dry summer so water can be pulled into main arteries. This forces crawfish to seek higher ground, and reproduction increases. Then, a wet fall and mild winter are needed, followed by a warm spring. These are ideal growth conditions for mudbugs.

Throw in a few hurricanes, mix in a tropical storm or two, and the process can get quite exciting — or depressing.

Buyers, who sit in a more comfortable position, receive crawfish from two different sources. One industry provides wild crawfish from the Atchafalaya basin, which normally monopolizes the market following Lent. The other provides pond crawfish harvested by farmers, which dominates the market during the early months of the year.

The pond farming industry remains a supplementary income for most people, with sugar cane or rice kicking in for the bottom line. For the Durand family in St. Martinville, it’s rice. They use their 1,200 acres to plant both products. An average year will yield about 600 pounds of crawfish per acre, with all six of the Durand brothers fishing 12 traps per acre. It’s hard work, and when Mother Nature has her way, the family has to find extra income by driving trucks or doing bulldozer work.

During the late ’80s, the Durands ran their ponds seven days a week, today, it’s only worthwhile to work them for three. It seems most statistics have gone down for the family since that time. Back then, they were hauling in 400 sacks a day for retail and wholesale at Tchefuncta Valley Seafood, compared to only 150 sacks a day currently. Where there was once 50 employees, mostly for the peeling operation, now there are only three.

But the family business is still moving along, supplemented by the rice crops and other outside markets they’ve found for live sales. Even though the outlook might seem bleak, the Durand farm is being studied by LSU as a model operation. “We’ve always just rolled with the punches,” says Margo Babin, one of the Durand sisters who handles the bookkeeping. “Everybody supports everybody. It’s a whole different thing when you’re working to support so many different families.”

Just like everyone else, the Durands suffered due to the influx of Chinese crawfish tails in the early ’90s. At the
processing industry has gotten so weak that there's no money to put a petition together. We can't seem to get money from the government, and it's just growing stagnant.

Louisiana Crab Task Force member and Catfish Wholesale owner Jim Rich

Photo by Tom Fenster

Commercial fishing has been severely limited, forcing fishermen to either abandon it or settle for small catches.

time, Louisiana processors filed a petition with the U.S. Commerce Department to levy imported crawfish with duties ranging up to 201 percent. In 1997, they got their wish. The reasoning behind the decision was that Chinese crawfish were selling far below fair market value. As such, local processors were entitled to a share of the money collected.

As one of the original petitioners, Teche Valley Seafood received an initial check for $45,000, which amounted to pocket change when compared to the $185,000 in its original claim. It still gets regular checks from the petition, but the family contends the money has done nothing to significantly improve their operations. Other processors, who have received larger sums, however, have found ways to reinvest the money into their operations with some success. Yet no one will be able to recoup what they lost in capital during the '90s. It's quite simple to track the progress of the industry over the past 15 years and see exactly where the bottom dropped out. During the mid-90s, Chinese imports were tallying about $40 million annually, but by 2000 that figure had tripled. During the same period, processors went from numbering in the hundreds to about 30 today, while fishermen went from 3,100 to about 2,200.

HOOK, LINE AND SINKER

Pete Cerica enjoys his life out along Bayou Savage in New Orleans. He can wake up and drink a cup of coffee as the sun dances off the water, then take a few more steps in the back yard and start working. "I love it out here," Cerica says. "You have all the amenities of country living with the big city only a few minutes away." But just because Cerica is far from the hustle and bustle, doesn't mean he's immune to stress and turmoil.

Like his father and grandfather before him, Cerica is a commercial fisherman. He serves as president of the Lake Pontchartrain Fishermen's Association and chairman of the Louisiana Seafood Management Council. He spends as much time working on policy matters as he does on the water, but for him, they are intertwined.

He grew up watching his father trudge away from home during the early '60s, witnessing the hard times with his own eyes. Still, Cerica wanted to be a fisherman, despite his father's warnings. "He said, 'You're going in it,'" Cerica says. "He told me he would rather me do something else."

"Maybe I should have listened." Cerica chuckles loudly at the afterthought, then is asked if he would want his daughter in the family business.

"Look, there's no future in it," he says. "I wouldn't even want her dating a commercial fisherman."

Of all the different sectors that fall under the banner of commercial seafood, finfish — Cerica's specialty — is probably the one that gets the least attention. Maybe it's because the fishing industry has been severely limited, forcing fishermen to either abandon it or settle for small catches.

"All finfish are line and hook, and there's no fishing during night or weekend," Cerica says. "It's a hard thing for livepeople to understand. You just can't fish 9-to-5. You have to fish tides, and that doesn't work out to be 9-to-5 all the time."

For many commercial fishermen, the biggest blow to their trade came several years ago when the Legislature took nets out of the water. At the urging of groups like the Coastal Conservation Association, the largest sport-fishing lobby in the state, lawmakers expressed concern about the over-fishing of certain species. The most emotional debate has been over redfish, which cannot be commercially harvested in Louisiana waters, no matter how popular it might be. Last year, Sen. Butch Gautreaux, D-Morgan City, attempted to reverse the law, but pulled it from consideration after he and his family received death threats from recreational fishermen.

Speckled trout, another sought after species, has been confined to a rod-and-tackle fishery. Mullet, which can be used for bait or for its roe, was recently confined to day fishing.

Cerica says the commercial fisherman's enemy is not foreign imports or fuel prices, but rather the nature of politics at the State Capitol, where many of these laws are passed. "We try as commercial fishermen, with a little savviness, to influence the process, but we can't win," he says.

"It's all up there in Baton Rouge. If we don't get some new and creative minds in the Legislature after the 2007 elections, some people that are willing to work with biology rather than social and political ideas, I don't think we can save the fishery. If we try the same, there's no way in hell we're going to survive."

It's a sentiment shared by many, like A.J. Fabre, the president of the Louisiana Shrimp Association. Early this year, the Legislature passed a new law stiffening penalties for fishermen who harvest shrimp out of season. District attorneys were concerned that the old penalties weren't enough, that fishermen were willing to risk the consequences as a "cost of doing business."

Their costs are hovering around $1,95, compared to 60 cents five years ago, Fabre argues people have to make a living somehow. "I don't agree with that bill," he says. "When a man needs to buy milk and diapers for his baby, and there are shrimp out there, I can't blame him for doing what he's got to do." The new laws breaking the old penalties, Fabre says fishermen will have to quickly learn in coming years how to directly market their product. That means cutting out the middleman and working with restaurants and grocery stores personally. "It's going to be tough for a lot of people," he says.

The industry is changing, and there's nothing anyone can do about it, says John Roussel, the assistant secretary of Wildlife and Fisheries. The future looks particularly dark when one considers the amount of new food coming into the industry.

"There are more middle-age or upper-age people in the fisheries right now," Roussel adds. "The recruitment of younger people is at an all-time low."

Voisin, chairman of the Louisiana Oyster Task Force, says the challenges will come to an end one day, at which point, more hurdles will arise. It has been that way for generations, he says, and the fisheries are still standing. The current situation, though, is different and will require some willpower and determination.

"Charles Darwin said it's the strongest that survive," Voisin says. "But that's not true. It's not even the most intelligent. It will be the ones who are willing to change their ways. It's the key right now — a willingness to adopt the future before it is heaped upon you. We need to make the future ours. We'll fight all of these problems, and when there will probably be more. But we'll face those, too. Cajun people, and people in south Louisiana, are the most resourceful people I've ever seen. We will make it."