Sailing into history

Shrimer says state may soon see end of its independent fleet

John Sullivan
jsullivan@theadvertiser.com

DELCAMBRE — It may not have been loud, but some shrimpers feel the death knell for their industry has already been sounded.

"Man, we are hurting," said shrimper Keith Guidry, 47, of Cut Off.

"There's no denying that."

Faced with a rising tide of foreign imports and federal regulations and a sharp drop in dockside prices, this may be the last days of the independent shrimper, Guidry said.

One such shrimper is Todd Champagne, a boat captain who watched his catch being unloaded Friday in Delcambre.

A veteran of the shrimping industry, Champagne said the price of shrimp on the docks makes it hard for shrimpers to make a profit.

"It's hard right now to make a living," Champagne said. "The prices aren't there."

Low dockside prices are just one of the problems shrimpers are facing, Guidry said.

"We are an industry that just isn't keeping up with the economy," Guidry said. "Between the storms, prices, imports and the TEDs, we have too much going against us."

Shrimpers and TEDs

The TEDs are Turtle Excluder Devices, cage-like pieces of equipment placed in trawl nets to allow endangered sea turtles to escape from being drowned. Shrimpers say the TEDs, which cost about $500 a piece, are too expensive, let out too much of their catch and aren't necessary.

The National Marine Fisheries Service says the TEDs are necessary to protect endangered Kemp's Ridley sea turtles from becoming entangled in trawl nets and drowning.

But, the TEDs are just one item on a long list of things that include Mother Nature that seem to be against the shrimpers.

Tropical Storm Isidore and Hurricane Lili kept the Louisiana shrimping fleet bottled up in their harbors for more than a month in September and October.

"I think this is the last generation of independent shrimpers," Guidry said. "What a shame that will be. I pray to God that I am wrong, but what if I'm not?"

Guidry said he first stepped on the deck of a shrimp boat when he was 7 years old and that at the age of 13, he quit school to work full-time on his father's boat.

"This is my legacy," Guidry said. "This is what I am, and this is what I do. It's a hard thing for me to say this may be our last stand."

Besides the costs of TEDs, Guidry said a shrimper will have to pay for fuel, ice, the salaries of the crew and all the assorted small items a shrimp boat captain has to get before setting sail.

"A good-size boat could eat up $150 to $200 a day in just fuel," Guidry said. "Then you come in, and you're only getting 90 cents or $1.20 per pound. You wind up making nothing."

Operational costs increase

Guidry said shrimpers have seen everything from the cost of fuel to the cost of nets go up, but they haven't seen an increase in the price they get for their catches.

According to the Louisiana Agricultural Statistics Services, the state contributes about 28 percent of the total volume of the U.S. fisheries with a value of about $1 billion annually.

The catch is comparable to the entire Atlantic seaboard, and triple that of the remaining Gulf states. More than 50,000 people are engaged in wetland-dependent fisheries.

The annual shrimp and oyster harvest supplies 35 percent to 40 percent of the nation's needs.

"I think that in a couple of years, maybe 10 at the most, you won't see a shrimping industry like we have now," Guidry said. "It will be very different."