Senate panel approves bills limiting redfish catch, use of nets

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A Senate committee voted Thursday on bills to halt the use of special nets to catch large redfish and to limit the number of the big fish sports and commercial fishermen can have in their possession.

New Orleans chef Paul Prudhomme's recipe for blackened redfish and the new popularity for Cajun cooking have made the fish a rage in other states.

The Senate Natural Resources Committee approved without objection SB313 by Sen. Ben Bagert, D-New Orleans. The bill says commercial or sports fishermen can possess no more than two redfish more than 30 inches long.

The panel also approved by a 4-1 vote SB302, also by Bagert, prohibiting possession of a purse seine aboard a vessel with redfish or speckled trout. The vessel, fish and equipment can be seized when there is a violation, Bagert said.

Bagert told committee members and a packed room filled with fishermen that the state has learned too late of its need to protect its resources.

"We have 'Sportsman's Paradise' on our license plates," said Bagert, "but there's trouble in paradise, gentlemen."

Bagert described a new menace, "purse boats working Louisiana — not a boat, more of a ship," threatening the seafood resources of the state.

While Louisiana is trying to manage the fish, "massive slaughter" of the non-popular fish is occurring in federal waters, U.S. Rep. John Breaux, D-Crowley, said recently.

"The Gulf Coast Conservation Association is supporting the Bagert bills."

But in response, Harlon Pearce, a New Orleans seafood dealer, said the Bagert bills would "put this seafood industry back in the dark ages."

Pearce said hard work had gone into developing a program for marketing "bull reds. ... You're going to kill the restaurants" using the big fish as they have become more popular.

"I'm getting tired of coming here (to the committee) trying to save jobs. ... Maybe you should tell us what to do," said Pearce in an emotional plea as he saw that the committee was lined up against use of the nets and the wholesale catching of the fish for sale in other states.

"We couldn't sell bull reds four years ago" before a market was developed, said Pearce.

Bagert charged that big purse seine boats from Florida were the culprits in Louisiana's problem with large redfish catches.

"There is no data to show there is a depleting of any species," said Giles Regard, speaking for commercial fishermen.

The bills would affect a large segment of Louisiana workers, he said, "not tourists, not New Yorkers, not Texans."

"We're not out to put sports fishermen out of business," Regard told panel members.