Shell reefs disappearing

By Betsy Cook

Common sense is a phrase that crops up often in the conversation with “T-John” Mialjevich, president of Concerned Shrimpers of Louisiana.

It makes no sense to Mialjevich that shell reefs without live oysters are called “dead” reefs. To Mialjevich and other shrimpers, the reefs are of vital importance to the shrimping industry.

“If I were to shrimp 500 yards from a shell reef, and you were to shrimp a half a mile from a reef, and I was to catch more shrimp, wouldn’t it make sense that the closer you get to the reefs, the better the shrimping?”

Mialjevich stood on the Eugene Island, pointing out the last of a reef that is a link in a vital chain of reefs that forms the southern boundary of the Louisiana coast.

In the tidelands dispute settlement, the federal government agreed that shell reefs were of sufficient land mass to constitute the southernmost boundary of Louisiana.

The Louisiana Department of Natural Resources in November of 1982 showed by aerial reconnaissance two of the reefs that form that boundary, the Point Au Fer and White Shell Reefs, are no longer visible.

This could reopen the tidelands dispute and possibly cost the state millions of dollars in oil and gas revenues from offshore fields such as Eugene Island and Rabbit Island, which might wind up in federal waters.

“You are standing on what is the last of the Point Au Fer reef chain,” said Richard Hayes, president of Save Our Coasts. “That is six or seven miles of reef that is gone.”

“You see that sunken barge out there?” said Edward “Smokey” Floyd, a shrimper since 1948. “You used to be able to walk out there in good weather. You couldn’t do that now.” The barge is approximately five miles from Eugene Island. Floyd shrimps out of the Morgan City area, Mialjevich from Delcambre.

According to Mialjevich and Floyd, the reefs mean something else as well. “It means I will have to do something else,” said Floyd. “It’s going to make a ghost town of this area, what with the downturn in the oil industry and the reefs gone.”

For 10 to 12 years he said shrimpers in the area have been witnessing the destruction of those reefs. The reefs are protected from dredging by a 1976 agreement between the Attorney General’s Office and the shell dredging companies, to preserve that southern boundary of Louisiana. Floyd said he witnessed illegal dredging on the reefs not far from Eugene Island in 1981. Mialjevich said he has witnessed the dredging of the restricted reefs on numerous occasion, and testified to that knowledge in hearing on Feb. 25 before the Louisiana Coastal Commission.

“I told them I saw the dredge parked on a restricted reef with shells on the barges,” he said. “They asked me if I saw the shell actually being dredged. To do that you would need a wet suit and tanks to go underwater.”

Again that phrase “common sense.” It would make common sense that if the dredge is parked on the restricted reef, and there are shells loaded on the barges, the illegal dredging activity was taking place,” Mialjevich said.

Mialjevich broke a shell off of an underwater portion of Eugene Island. “You call this a dead reef. Look at this shell, all covered with slime. The shrimp can find all kinds of things to eat from these reefs,” Mialjevich said with the reefs gone, it makes sense to believe the shrimp catch just isn’t going to be what was.

“There is no where for them to eat off of around here,” he said.

Floyd said shrimpers and fishermen alike are late in discovering the value of the reefs. “We thought they were doing us a favor, because now we could drag our lines there, because the reefs are no longer there,” he said. “All we did was fool ourselves.”

Hayes is asking for the creation of zoning for the coastal area, which would give the reefs added protection. “Zoning is required by law under coastal zone management, but it is not being done.”

He is also asking for a change in the coastal use permits for shell dredging activity. “This industry is unique in that it is not sight specific,” he said. “They don’t have to furnish drawings or diagrams for their activity. They can do what they want, unlike everyone else. Whether it’s to build a boat slip or ramp, or dig a canal, coastal use permitting requires the furnishing of drawings and diagrams.”

Hayes is also calling for a survey of the reefs, a survey that the attorney general’s office is also advocating. “I don’t think the Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife and Fisheries and Governor David Treen really want to know what’s out there,” he said.