Shrimp, oyster industry issues probed

By MIKE COOK
Outdoor editor

Joe Palmisano of Chauvin, chairman of the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission, has called for a "full-fledged investigation of everything that took place" in an inside-outside shrimp line controversy in Terrebonne Parish, and commission member Jimmy Jenkins of Baton Rouge has asked for a report on what the state derives from and spends on oyster leases.

Both requests came at Tuesday's regular monthly meeting of the commission in Baton Rouge.

Palmisano appeared angry and embarrassed because commission members were unaware of the inside-outside boundary line error until a controversy erupted.

"I want any and all things done to get to the bottom of this," Palmisano said. "And if there was favoritism in any way, I think disciplinary action should be taken."

Because of a clerical error in describing the shrimp boundary line, a roughly triangular patch of Terrebonne Parish which traditionally had been "inside" was included in "outside" territorial waters. Some shrimpers learned of the error and took advantage of it when outside territorial waters opened to shrimping on April 30. The spring brown shrimp season in inside waters in Zone 2 did not open until May 16.

"This is a nasty situation in our area, and we have been accused of favoritism," Palmisano said. "I heard 70-foot boats were legally pulling four trawls in canals but that 60 to 80 other shrimpers came to his house and asked if it was legal for them to trawl in the area."

"I had to tell them I didn't know," Palmisano said. "But there was an agent two blocks down the road handing out maps."

Palmisano wants to know where the maps came from. According to Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries officials, there were only two maps with plotted lines showing the erroneous inside-outside shrimp line—one at the Enforcement Division and one sent to Terrebonne Parish District Attorney Doug Greenburg at his request.

Phil Bowman of the LDWF Seafood Division said Greenburg discovered the error last winter when he plotted the coordinates in the six-page legal description. In March, Bowman said he had a surveyor plot the inside-outside line and was told there were errors, but he was unaware of the magnitude because he had not unrolled the map and looked at the errors.

Bowman said LDWF personnel reviewed the description in April, found several mistakes and made nine corrections to submit to the Legislature.

Col. Ray Montet, Enforcement Division chief, said Capt. Roy Chauvin picked up a certified copy of the map in New Orleans on May 2 to deliver to Greenburg.

"For our agents to be handing out maps, that's wrong," Palmisano said. "Why should a field agent have a map when only the district attorney's office has one? Some serious accusations have been made, and we don't need this kind of publicity."

Jenkins said a friend in Covington sent him one of the maps. He told Bowman the matter should have been looked into earlier so the commission could have attempted to take emergency action to correct the errors.

LDWF Deputy Secretary Kell McInnis will handle the investigation requested by Palmisano. LDWF Secretary Virginia Van Sickle said new, correct inside-outside shrimp line maps will be plotted and published.

After several minutes of attempting to learn the value to oyster fishermen of leases obtained from the LDWF for $2 an acre, Jenkins asked for a full report.

"I think we're spending more money policing oysters than we're getting for them," he said. "I think we're losing money fooling with oysters."

William "Corky" Perret, chief of the Seafood Division, reported that all environmental conditions necessary for shrimp growth are now favorable, but there was a plunge in water temperature below 20 degrees centigrade in May for the first time in 25 years.

He said preliminary reports on the brown shrimp season that opened in Zone 2 (from South Pass of the Mississippi River to the western boundary of Vermilion Bay) included one surprise—a "substantial" catch of 31-35 and 36-40 count white shrimp in Vermilion Bay. He reported catches of 400 pounds by commercial shrimpers and 50-60 pounds by recreational shrimpers.

The average size of brown shrimp in tests in the Barataria area Sunday was 101 to the pound, but the average catch Monday was 85-88, with larger boats catching 1,000 pounds, smaller boats 300-400 pounds and recreational shrimpers 75-100 pounds. Shrimpers in the Timbalier area were less successful, with large boats catching about 200 pounds, smaller boats 100 pounds and sport shrimpers 60-70 pounds. Perret said the small shrimp brought 35 to 40 cents a pound.

Zones 1 (east of the South Pass) and 3 (west of Vermilion Bay) were also originally scheduled to open Monday, but their openings were delayed until 6 a.m. May 25 by legislative resolution, officially approved Tuesday by the LWFC.

Perret said tests in Zone 1 produced shrimp averaging 137 count, with approximately 20 percent larger than 100 count. In Zone 3, only 6 percent were 100 count or larger, and in one area the count was 546 to a pound. But he said there is "tremendous recruitment" of small shrimp into the Zone 3 and continued recruitment in the other two zones.

Montet gave an report showing increased enforcement activity for the weeks May 2-8 and 9-13, with help from several agents temporarily reassigned from northern Louisiana.

In other action, the commission:
• Served notice of intent for goose creeping regulations during the 1988-89 season.
• Served notice of intent to remove the area east of Queen Bess Island and an area around Little Bayou Pierre from oyster leasing.
• Ratified a 14-inch minimum size limit for bass and a 10 bass daily limit at Chicot Lake in Evangeline Parish for a research project, beginning June 1, 1988, and continuing through Dec. 31, 1989.
• Drew for three Remington Model 870 magnum shotguns, donated by Safari Club International of Baton Rouge and the Louisiana Wild Turkey Federation, from the names of successful turkey hunters who participated in the turkey check station program. Winners were Ricky Holifield of Pearl River, Wiley Garrett of Coushatta and Don Breland of Picayune, Miss. Breland killed his turkey in St. Tammany Parish.

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