

Comments by Jerry Schill, Interim Executive Director
North Carolina Fisheries Association, Inc.
SUBJECT: Observer funding proposal; Endangered Species Act
February 25, 2014

North Carolina's commercial fishermen have offered a proposal they will take to the General Assembly for legislative consideration in this year's short session. The issue addresses the funding of observers in the gillnet fishery which is required for information with the interaction of sea turtles.

The measure was put together from suggestions by commercial fishermen and approved unanimously at a special meeting of the North Carolina Fisheries Association Board of Directors on Wednesday, February 19th.

The North Carolina Fisheries Association, a private trade association representing the interests of its member fishermen, seafood dealers and processors, approved the proposal at a special Board of Directors meeting last Wednesday.

The measure would fund the program entirely by increases in license fees and be administered as a separate special revenue fund in the office of the State Treasurer. The purpose of the fund is to enhance commercial fishing in North Carolina to provide monies for development of sustainable commercial fishing and to provide funding for North Carolina's incidental take permits for the commercial fishing industry under the Endangered Species Act, (ESA), or Marine Mammal Protection Act, (MMPA).

The principal of the Commercial Fishing Resources Fund would consist of a 100% increase in 6 license fees: Standard Commercial Fishing License; Retired Standard Commercial Fishing License; License to Land or Sell; License for Fish Dealers; Recreational Commercial gear licenses; and Shellfish Licenses.

The draft proposal suggests that the CFRF Board could disburse the principal and its investment income only upon the written direction of both the Marine Fisheries Commission and the approval of a Commercial Fishing Resource Fund Board of Directors, and such funds would be only for projects to develop sustainable commercial fishing and to provide funding for mandated observations of the commercial fishing industry.

The CFRF Board would consist of representatives from 6 commercial fishing groups:

- * North Carolina Fisheries Association;
- * North Carolina Watermen United;
- * Albemarle Fishermen's Association;
- * Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association;
- * Carteret County Fishermen's Association;
- * Brunswick County Fishermen's Association.

It is bittersweet that we make this announcement. While we are pleased that we have proposal to provide funding for the observer program, we are not so pleased of the need to do so.

For a little history: shortly after I began with the North Carolina Fisheries Association, (NCFA), in 1987, I attended a series of meetings with peer groups in the Gulf and South Atlantic to discuss the shrimp fishermen's interaction with sea turtles. Several species of turtles had been listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act, (ESA). The challenge for the shrimpers was to come up with a way to keep turtles from drowning in their nets or face the very real possibility of being put out of business by the federal government.

The federal government attempted to come up with a device to place in the shrimp net that would allow the escape of sea turtles while allowing shrimpers to continue making a living, but it was only after the shrimpers themselves got into

the design and implementation that they came up with a workable solution. The devices are called TEDs, or turtle excluder devices.

Although TEDs work effectively to protect turtles, they do cost shrimpers money due to a reduction in catch.

The amount of capital, that is, time and money, spent by shrimpers to protect sea turtles has been tremendous. Not only with the costs of the TEDs themselves and the loss of the shrimp catch, but the hundreds of meetings the shrimpers have attended and those of us who represent them. Meetings in the Gulf and the South Atlantic and in Washington DC.

In the 90s we began meeting with a group called the Alliance for America, which was a grassroots bunch of folks from all over the U.S.; farmers, ranchers, loggers, forestry workers, miners and fishermen who got together to talk about the Endangered Species Act and how it was affecting their individual lives and their communities. We shared our stories. They heard about turtles and teds and we heard about spotted owls and. We told them about the posting of instructions for resuscitating a sea turtle on our fishing boats, and they told us about whole logging communities being lost when a mill closed due to the spotted owl.

Whether it was the spotted owl in the northwest, the turtles in the southeast or the grizzly bear in Montana, one thing became a very large concern. When it came to sea turtle protection, there was no end game! All of this protection, to what end? Is the goal to bring these species back to healthy levels? If so, what are those levels? When can we see the results of our efforts?

In our case it became clear that the delisting process, or getting to the point where the species populations were healthy enough to be upgraded or taken off the list, was unattainable! Each species that is listed has a recovery plan including criteria that must be met to be delisted. In the case of the sea turtles, one of the criteria includes a percentage of beaches that must be in public, as in government, ownership or control!

North Carolina's recreational fishermen and the outer banks communities have been severely hurt by the beach closures due to the piping plover.

In addition, it appears that commercial fishermen may have fisheries closed due to interaction with sturgeon, once again due to the federal government and the Endangered Species Act.

While U.S. citizens suffer as our government continues to enact one restriction after another to unilaterally save the world, other countries continue with business as usual, harvesting the turtle eggs and even the turtles themselves.

We need some political muscle to turn this around. The problem goes way beyond just affecting fishermen. We need fewer politicians going on talk shows and be willing to take on these job-killing ideas of radicals.

And to get there, we need fewer citizens sitting around over a cup of coffee talking about the need for "somebody should do something", and more people wanting to actually DO something. That somebody is us.

If not me, WHO?

If not now, WHEN?