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Shrimpers anticipate bountiful harvest

Storms like Frances are helping the catch, despite lower prices, profits

By DAVID SIKES Staff Writer

ARANSAS PASS — Shrimpers seeking shelter in Conn Brown Harbor this week talked of full nets, low shrimp prices and rough seas. Tuesday was the third time since shrimp season began on July 8 that Aransas Pass shrimper Robert Lopez, captain of the Anthony Carl, has had to run from stormy seas. But Lopez knows that the loss of shrimping days will be offset by a better-than-average catch after the storm passes. Boiling seas stir up shrimp, bringing them out of hiding and away from net-tearing structures, shrimpers say. Some end up in smooth-bottom areas, ideal for dragging nets, shrimpers say. "It's kind of a blessing in disguise," Lopez said. "It takes a while for everything to settle down. We catch too many crabs at first. But after that, it's good." The whole season has been good, at least in the amount of shrimp caught, shrimpers said. Wildlife officials say that from January through July, shrimpers caught about 2 million more pounds than they did during the same period last year, and they've done it in fewer trips. And despite the lowest fuel costs in a decade, the surplus of Gulf shrimp coupled with low consumption in Asia, has resulted in low shrimp prices and low profits, said Mark Herndon, marketing director at Gulf King, an Aransas Pass shrimping operation. Rockport shrimper Van Nguyn, captain of the Bethany, said he too is catching more shrimp than last year. However, last year was one of his worst, he added. "It's good right now, but nothing like five or six years ago," Nguyn said. Before the season opened, wildlife officials predicted a mediocre year for shrimp harvests. Shrimpers were also concerned about a new federal law requiring them to install a device designed to allow juvenile red snapper and other small fish to swim free of their nets. But shrimpers also feared the bycatch reduction device would allow shrimp to escape as well. The bycatch reduction device, called a fisheye, is the result of a conclusion by wildlife officials that shrimpers in the Gulf of Mexico are killing too many juvenile red snapper by inadvertently catching them in their nets. Shrimpers argue that juvenile snapper rarely live in the flat-bottom waters they trawl and that the mandate was in response to pressure from sport fishing organizations. Wilma Anderson, executive director of the Texas Shrimp Association, said that if snapper populations are diminishing, then recreational and commercial fisheries also are to blame and should make similar sacrifices. The loss of shrimp will cost shrimpers between \$60 and \$100 million a year statewide, Anderson said. Government fisheries experts estimate that the devices would cause only minimal losses. Federal wildlife officials say shrimpers may actually realize a net gain in their catches because fewer fish in the nets means more shrimp. Shrimpers also save time when culling their cleaner catches, wildlife officials said. "We figured on a 4 percent average shrimp loss with the fisheye," said Chris Smith, a National Marine Fisheries Service spokesman. "That's minuscule compared to the number of fish that are being saved. We're talking about saving tons of fish every day." "How could they say they're losing 30 percent of their catch if landings are up?" he added. Shrimpers say their hefty catches are the result of this year's healthy shrimp population. Shrimpers said this week that through trial and error, they have learned to haul in their nets with minimal loss of shrimp through the fisheye. But not all boats have found success, shrimpers said. "If you pick up too slow, you lose shrimp," Lopez said. "If you pick up the wrong way, you lose shrimp. If you try to wash the mud out of your bag, you lose shrimp. You have to do it just right or you lose shrimp. But as long as they stay alive when you lose them, I guess it's OK. You can always catch them again." Federal officials say they expected a period of adjustment. "They're not just learning to live with it, I think they're going to learn to like it," Smith said. Shrimpers suspect shrimp are escaping while the nets are being dragged. Despite the objections, 97 percent of the shrimpers checked are using the device, Smith said. In addition to the fisheye, the fisheries service has imposed snapper-saving measures on anglers and commercial fishermen. The bag limit for anglers went dropped from five to four fish this year and the recreational snapper season will close Sept. 30, when this year's quota is expected to be reached. The season ends on Sept. 15 for commercial snapper fishermen. "We could have closed the season in mid-August," Smith said. "We see (the extension) as an encouraging sign that the fisheye is working. We're confident that using the bycatch reduction device will allow the recovery of the red snapper by the year 2019." Shrimpers say NMFS should have reduced the red snapper quota and closed the season earlier.