

## EDITORIAL IN DAYTONA BEACH NEWS-HERALD

Florida's fishing industry needs help from the feds

OUR VIEW

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Evidence that tight federal regulations, high oil prices and a poor consumer economy are rocking Florida's once-vibrant fishing and boating industries couldn't be clearer.

Commercial fishing trips out of Volusia County in 2010 were down 49 percent from 2000 numbers.

The number of registered boats in Volusia County is down 22 percent from 2000 registrations.

In Sunday's News-Journal, local fishermen and boat operators said they have never seen these conditions before. Barry Freeman, a charter operator, has sold two of his boats. He got no calls over the Labor Day holiday weekend, he said.

It's not just about fewer people wetting a hook. The entire fishing industry -- a major part of the Florida economy -- is suffering. Statewide sales of boats, engines and other related items are down 8.1 percent from 2009, and down 44 percent from the industry high in 2005. That downward trend since 2005 is significant because it shows an economic slowdown not solely attributable to the Great Recession, which began in December 2007.

Florida's \$16 billion boating industry and \$8 billion fishing industry are being vexed by factors that won't be corrected by an improvement in the economy.

For one thing, gasoline is costly.

Boat operators were paying about \$1.50 per gallon in 2000. They briefly saw those prices again, at the trough of the Great Recession, in early 2009. But for most of the last six years, boaters have had to deal with gasoline that costs more than \$3 per gallon.

Those costs have hurt charter operators perhaps worst of all. The high cost of gasoline is eating into one of Florida's most popular tourism niches.

The biggest snag may be the government. Federal restrictions on fishing for certain species have harmed the fishing industry all along the East Coast.

Fishermen in Flagler and Volusia counties have been affected by a federal ban on catching red snapper in a large area in the South Atlantic. The ban came after the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council acted on a federal study in 2008 that showed depleted stocks of red snapper off the coast of the Southeast.

Restrictions on red snapper fishing in the Gulf of Mexico also have taken a toll on the state's fishing industry. The officials who impose rules for the South Atlantic have placed restrictions on other popular game fish, including red grouper and black sea bass.

The federal government should revisit the snapper ban. Some of the rationale for the ban is based upon computer models that have been called into question by critics. Florida's U.S. senators, Marco Rubio and Bill Nelson, and U.S. Rep. John Mica, R-Winter Park, all believe that federal decision-making has been driven by inexact science.

Federal officials can put Florida's fishing industry on the road to recovery by removing the unnecessary ban on catching red snapper.

It would also help fishermen if the government pushed for more domestic oil drilling that would expand global supplies of oil and help lower prices at the pump. But the main thing the government should do is get out of the way of fishermen and let them catch fish.

This would be an effective "stimulus" program for Florida's dormant economy