

## Battered and bruised but still fishing

**Last year's quadruple hurricanes crippled Florida's stone crab and spiny lobster fishing industries. Trap loss estimates crested at \$29 million. Crabs and lobsters survived unscathed but fishermen's traps, equipment and homes did not. With no federal assistance, will Florida's most valuable seafood industry recover?**

### 2005 storm sequences and associated trap losses

**July, Hurricane Dennis** grazed the southwestern Florida Keys. Fishermen sustained minor losses.

**August, Hurricane Katrina** crossed the middle Keys as a low-strength hurricane. It moved and destroyed traps on the ocean side of the Florida Keys. Fishermen sustained about a 25 percent trap loss.

**September, Hurricane Rita** heavily affected the upper Florida Keys where fisherman sustained heavy gear losses; losses were also sustained throughout the middle and lower keys. Fishermen sustained an additional 25 percent trap loss.

**October, Hurricane Wilma** made landfall in Collier County and moved and destroyed traps throughout the Florida Keys. Fishermen lost another 25 percent of their traps, and many suffered additional personal damage to their homes, cars or trucks.

**Cumulative trap loss estimate:** about 75 percent. Traps are uninsurable.

FLORIDA KEYS — Fishermen who trap spiny lobster and stone crabs — in Florida Bay, the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean — were slammed by quadruple hurricanes in the 2005-2006 commercial fishing season. Their wooden lobster traps tore apart when one hurricane after another dragged them over coral reefs, jounced them through grass beds and drove them into sandy ledges. High-impact plastic stone crab traps fared better. But a combination of “underwater hurricane” currents and surface winds up to 160-miles-per-hour hauled both kinds as far as ten miles from their original positions. Some traps sank in deep water. Others were retrieved during fishermen’s 45-day-long salvage efforts.

But 700,000 stone crab traps and 400,000 lobster traps — at a value of about \$25 each — are missing.

Traps are uninsurable. When they disappear, you may as well lash a fistful of dollars to a lead weight and watch it sink to the ocean floor.

Federal or state assistance for fishermen hit by natural catastrophes is nonexistent.

Fishermen have no safety net. They receive no compensation.

Florida Keys fishermen are battered and bruised from jaw-dropping gear and financial losses, but they’re also picking up the pieces. Those who can are fishing again. They are making the best of the remaining season with the gear they have and what they managed to rebuild.

“A lot of the traps are just plain gone,” said captain Mitch Gale. Gale is a 30-year-veteran Keys fisherman and captain of Galeforce II, which he docks at his waterfront house in Big Pine Key. He estimates he lost more than half his traps, or about 2,700.

“In 2004, we had four near misses,” captain Gale said. “We were holding our breath all season. This year we had four hits.”

Supplies of stone crab and spiny lobster from the Florida Keys were dented after the second hurricane, and eventually were cut in half or more following the third and fourth hurricanes.

“We’ve got a lot of smiles,” said Gary Graves. “But they’re worth nothing. They’re valueless.” Graves runs Keys Fisheries, a fish house in Marathon and one of Florida’s

biggest producers of stone crabs. Seafood restaurants served up alternate dishes — or raised prices — while fishermen searched day-in and day-out to find as many 16-inch-high by 24-inch-wide by 32-inch-long traps as possible in the vast ocean.

“I had boats out that were spending \$900 to \$1,400 a day, just looking for traps,” Graves said. “Fishermen would take 30 to 45 days searching on a grid. You do the math.” His daily costs include gas and deckhand’s salaries.

“We didn’t get hit with just a couple hurricanes,” Graves added. “We got hit with high fuel prices too.”

Captain Gale spent about 30 days running his 37-foot Monzon searching for and recovering lost traps.

“I spent \$100 a day in gas, searching” Gales said, “plus you’ve got salaries for deck hands. It adds up. And, those are days we aren’t fishing, our traps aren’t being productive, we’re not making landings.” Without landing lobster or crab catches, there’s no income.

A productive lobster trap landed on the Galeforce II may bring in \$50 or \$60. Captain Gale started the 2005 season with about 5,000 traps but he estimates he lost about 1,400 stone crab traps and 1,300 lobster traps.

“We were lucky to save a couple hundred that would’ve been smashed,” said Vicki, captain Gale’s wife.

They repaired and rebuilt some.

“We rebuilt 200 after Katrina, and 200 more after Wilma,” Gale said. But the wood was scarce or expensive because most was going to New Orleans.

“I’m gonna survive,” captain Gale said. “If I can get by this year, I can get by any year.”

### **Trap lines and timelines**

When the winds stopped whipping the ocean and the rage drained from the rains, the total tally of lost traps for Florida Keys fishermen settled at about 75 percent. Four back-to-back hurricanes — Dennis, Katrina, Rita and Wilma — wrecked businesses and wrecked homes.

“Devastating,” said Graves, the fish house owner. “It’s just been devastating.”

Commercial lobster season starts August 6 and runs through March 31 of the next year. Stone crab season overlaps, starting October 15 ending May 15.

When Hurricane Dennis hit in July, fishermen had not yet set their trap lines. Dennis dumped enough freshwater in Florida Bay to change the salinity. Lobster searching for saltier water moved out of the bay, and barnacles — which like less salty water — moved in. Dennis also caused what some called an “underwater hurricane,” moving sand and destroying grass beds. Fishermen had to learn where the new hot spots were for lobster and stone crabs.

When lobster season opened in August, barnacles hampered work.

“I had guys using five-sixteenths-of-an-inch ropes that grew to three-quarters of an inch or more, in just days,” Graves said. “They were encrusted with barnacles.”

Ropes snapped, weakened by barnacle growth, when men hauled 45 to 50 pound traps out of the water. Slits on the traps also filled in with the sharp, plaster-like-beige growths, sealing in lobster and water.

“We call them snowballs,” laughed Vicki. She occasionally works on Galeforce II. “The water would just leak out; some of them were so encrusted.”

After scraping traps clean of barnacles, fishermen in the middle keys moved their lobster trap lines from the bay out to the open ocean — and into the path of the next storm. Within weeks, Hurricane Katrina grazed the middle and outer keys — rearranging thousands of newly set trap lines. Fishermen also set traps off-shore near the Dry Tortugas, an island chain due west of Key West. The majority of traps set there were lost.

Estimated trap losses from Katrina are about 25 percent, said Ralph Boragine, executive director of the Monroe County Commercial Fishermen’s Association.

But Katrina was only Mother Nature’s warm-up.

Hurricane Rita rolled over the upper keys about a month after Katrina grazed the middle and lower keys.

“Fishermen in the upper keys sustained heavy gear losses,” Boragine said. “Only fishermen in the middle and lower keys had

gear left. At that point, everyone decided lobster season was a bust, so they set out their stone crab traps.”

Again, trap losses from Rita were estimated at 25 percent.

Captain Gale said fishermen mitigate potential losses by moving as many traps as possible to protected waters before a storm hits. But odds are not in your favor when you only have a week’s warning — or less — and you are fishing 5,000 traps but can only move 200 traps per day.

“We get criticized for leaving our traps out,” Gale said, “but sometimes it’s just not possible to move them all.”

About a month after Rita, Hurricane Wilma ricocheted off the Yucatan peninsula and cut a line for Collier County on south Florida’s west coast. Marathon sustained a nine-foot storm surge while the rest of the keys withstood four and five-foot surges.

Water stood three feet deep in homes, soaking drywall and ruining appliances. Water moved forklifts. It killed truck engines. Water destroyed on-board ice-makers — necessary for keeping catches fresh. And with wearying repetition, water and wind worked to pull more trap lines out to sea, to be sunk or deposited in new locations.

For a third time, trap losses were estimated at 25 percent.

“Katrina and Rita were bad for us, sure — they moved a lot of traps, and guys lost a lot of traps,” Boragine said. “But when Wilma came, they lost houses and trucks too.”

Altogether, most fishermen agree total trap losses were about 75 percent. Traps are uninsurable. It was a total loss.

### **Picking up the pieces**

Trap loss and gear loss estimates for Keys fishers bob around \$29 million. Estimates of the total economic impact to the area — including lost income, but excluding gear losses — range between \$140 million to \$210 million.

Some are calling the season a wash. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, commercial fishing’s regulatory body, declared the Gulf of Mexico fishery a failure.

“But what does that mean?” asked Boragine. “There’s no assistance for us attached to that. What does it mean? If you can tell me, you’ll be the first to figure it out.”

Wiped out and fed up, some fishermen are calling it quits. “We think about 20 percent of the guys are going to get out of the business,” Boragine said.

The deckhands and support workers are leaving too. “Affordable housing is gone, trailer parks are gone,” Vicki said. “The working class is leaving.”

If weathering the rough years in this industry isn’t tough enough, there are financial obstacles to entering it at all.

Captain Gale’s operation is unique, because he is one of few fishermen who own water-front property with a private dock and access to open water. Most fishermen rent dock slips and gear-storage space from a fish house, an added expense.

“Fishermen are an independent, resilient people,” said Keys Fisheries owner Graves, who also rents dock space to fishermen. “But I’ve been here since 1967 and we’re a dying breed. You come down to my docks, and all you see is men in their 40s and up. There are no young people.”

No one is stepping up to take over the industries, he said, mainly because the \$100,000 price tag — widely considered the minimum capital necessary to buy a boat and gear — is enough to keep some younger people from buying in. But sky-rocketing waterfront property costs are a second reason and are even forcing fish houses inland in search of affordable property.

In addition, each trap must be tagged with a certificate purchased from the state Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Lobster certificates cost \$1 per trap, and stone crab certificates cost 50 cents per trap. It may sound like pennies, but multiplied times thousands of traps, “it adds up,” Boragine said.

### **Lack of assistance**

Add a lack of federal or state financial assistance in bad storm years, and the result is an industry that is financially unattractive to even the most interested young workers.

But conversations are beginning between NOAA and fishermen to set up assistance packages for future record-loss years such as the 2005-2006 fishing season.

“We’re trying to work with the industry, to get them reprieve,” said Willie Puz, spokesman for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Puz said some of the short term measures include allowing use of non-commercial vessels to retrieve traps and deferring payment for trap tag fees until the end of the next season.

“So what?” Graves responded, when asked about the benefit of the fee deferment. “We still have to pay it.”

Captain Gale took a different angle. “That’s helpful to some guys,” he said. They can fish the season and not pay tag fees up front. “But we’d like to see them waive the tag fees,” Gale said. “We need a grant or some sort of aid.”

Disaster assistance may be on the horizon. A researcher with Sea Grant, a program linking fishery conservation research with industry applications and regulatory oversight, said that a January workshop

between fishermen and NOAA officials started conversations for establishing aid.

“We have some firm ideas,” Doug Gregory said. “But no commitments have been made.”

Fishermen conjure mythological connotations for being a crusty lot. Some would rather continue on than fool around with new regulations.

“We’d rather go fishing than sit down with government officials and fill out forms,” said Graves. “Fish bring in money, forms don’t.”

For the time being, Graves may have a point. Researchers and fishermen alike agree there are plenty of lobsters and crabs out there.

“I don’t have issues over the health of the stock,” captain Gale said. “There’s good years and bad years.”

But with the lack of fishing this year due to the hurricanes, Gregory said next year may be good.

“For those fishermen who have the ability to rebuild,” Gregory said, “they’ll have a good year.”



Fishermen recovering traps. Photo courtesy of Vicki Gale.