

Vanishing Fleet

Cost of fuel, worker shortage forcing shrimpers to tie up their boats

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By Aaron Nelsen/The Brownsville Herald

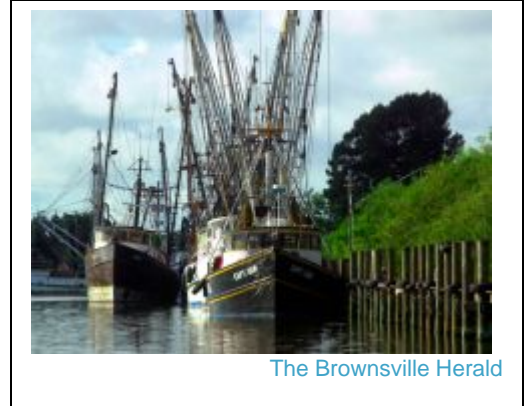
Carlton Reyes' truck bounces into the lot of Reyes Marine, his six-boat shrimping operation at the Brownsville shrimp basin.

He hops out, swatting at mosquitoes as he drops a machine part into the grease-streaked hand of his mechanic.

"There's always work to do," Reyes says, "for some of us anyway."

His attention turns to the dozens of shrimping vessels across the basin that will not trawl the Gulf of Mexico waters this year, or perhaps ever again.

With a sympathetic smile, Reyes climbs back in his truck on yet another errand, last year's battle cry, "Friends don't let friends eat imported shrimp," stamped in big white letters across his rear bumper, disappears in a cloud of dust.



The Brownsville-Port Isabel shrimp fleet is in retreat.

The boats that survived successive waves of cheap foreign imports and farm-raised shrimp are now buckling under a worker shortage and the pressure of exorbitant fuel prices, \$75,000 to fill an 18,000-gallon boat domestically.

Businesses have managed to offset some of their fuel costs by filling tanks in Mexico, where a gallon of diesel sells for \$2.40 a gallon.

Still, the fleet has lost another 60 boats to start this season, which began July 15. That's down from 220 in 2007 and 350 less than a decade ago.

"In some ways, it's probably a good thing," Reyes reasoned, "because even if the price of fuel wasn't killing us, we wouldn't have enough workers to man the boats."

As owner of a shrimping business and the president of the Brownsville-Port Isabel Shrimp Producers Association, Reyes has a front row seat to shrimping operations that have succumbed to the economic pressures.

Brownsville's shrimp basin alone has dozens of idle vessels.

Some businesses have only a portion of their fleet at sea, while others have called it quits, tying up their boats and abandoning the basin altogether.

"Nobody knows where they went for sure," Reyes said of the owners of a nine-boat fleet. "The old man isn't going to invest his retirement to save the business, and I guess the son decided he couldn't make any money so he left for the [oil](#) fields."

The troubles plaguing Brownsville's and Port Isabel's shrimping businesses are endemic throughout the industry.

The Southern Shrimp Alliance, which represents shrimpers across eight states along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts, claims that a decade ago there were more than 8,000 shrimping boats in the Gulf of Mexico.

Last year, that number was down to 1,100 boats, and this year it will shrink even further.

Today, the industry is a shell of its former halcyon days when thousands of boats roamed the Gulf of Mexico, earning upwards of \$5 a pound - the same pound now fetches \$3.50.

Wilma Anderson, executive director of the Texas Shrimp Association and a member of the Southern Shrimp Alliance, is driven to distraction by lawmakers' inaction.

She makes frequent trips to Washington D.C. on behalf of the industry, but her finger is set firmly on the [pulse](#) of Texas' shrimping business.

By her estimate, Texas employs approximately 10,000 seasonal workers in the shrimping industry.

Captains and deckhands are a devoted clan, and as such businesses count on their return the following season.

They also do a job largely ignored by domestic workers, unwilling to spend weeks at sea and apart from their families.

In return for their labor, they earn between \$12 and \$18 per 100 pounds of shrimp.

Under a provision added to the H-2B visa program in 2005, and renewed in 2006 and 2007, certain returning seasonal workers, including shrimpers, were exempt from the 66,000-worker cap.

That changed last year in September when anti-[news/](#)" class="autolink">immigration politicians and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus derailed legislation to renew the exemption, shutting the door on tens of thousands of temporary workers and dealing a blow to a range of industries that depend on foreign labor.

Already reeling from a \$4 dollar gallon of diesel, the shortage of H-2B visas delivered a knockout blow to hundreds of boats.

"Now, they're fixing to recess," Anderson said of the Congress. "With all the politics going on, not much is getting done and we're waiting for a solution."

Congress is at loggerheads over comprehensive immigration reform, of which H-2B visas is included.

The arching legislation also figures to tackle the question of what to do with the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants already in the country, and issues of border security.

Despite aligning itself with immigration's harsher critics, the CHC does support expanding the H-2B visa program, but not at the expense of its larger immigration goals.

It's a risky political maneuver, but a calculated risk.

By allowing the H-2B visa exemption to expire, the caucus alienates a key group of supporters. And in turn, it gains political capital.

Congressman Solomon P. Ortiz, D-Texas, a member of the CHC, has long voiced his support for Texas' shrimpers.

He laments the industry's decline, but says a short-term solution to the H-2B visa would undermine a larger and ultimately far-reaching plan for immigration.

"Once you start addressing immigration reform piecemeal," Ortiz said, "you whittle down support and endanger the whole package."

Ortiz doesn't anticipate relief any time soon as the fight over immigration legislation in Washington D.C. is expected to rage until after the presidential election and into next year.

Some businesses won't survive, but it's a sacrifice the CHC is willing to make to keep a comprehensive plan alive.

"These poor guys have had every book thrown at them except help," Ortiz said. "The fight is not over yet."

While Congress fumbles over a solution, businesses that rely on foreign workers make do.

Salvaging this year is a lost cause, Anderson says, and the fight has now turned to saving next season.

The fight to survive is a war of attrition. The future of the business is anybody's guess, according to Anderson

Uncertainty hangs like a dark cloud over Port Isabel where Harley Londrie manages Zimco Marine, a 23-boat family-owned operation. Despite receiving approval for 46 of his seasonal workers, the visas were never issued.

Londrie said he knew tough times were on the horizon when the H-2B visa exemption provision wasn't renewed, which is why he made the difficult decision to tie up nine of his boats at the end of last season.

Beset on all sides, if it's not the cost of fuel then there aren't enough workers, Londrie said.

"If you don't have the men you can't send the boats," Londrie said. "We're having a pretty good season, too."