

Santa Cruz Harbor: A “Pink Fish” Port

Commercial and recreational fisheries have played an important role in the history of Santa Cruz County. Following the federal Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996, fishery managers are required to assess the effects of regulations on fishing communities. However, a lack of social and economic data on fishing ports and communities has made it difficult to determine, much less predict, these impacts.

As part of an ongoing Fishing Communities Project (FCP), NOAA Fisheries economist Cindy Thomson and I are working together with fishing communities to develop baseline socio-economic commercial (and later, recreational) fishery information to help fishery managers, community members and others more proactively and effectively address fisheries issues and opportunities. Using existing fishery data on catches and their value, along with interviews and other input from fishermen, fish buyers and providers of goods and services, we have drafted our first FCP profile, which focuses on the commercial fishing community of Santa Cruz Harbor.

The Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor (SCH) is an important refuge and place of business for both resident and non-resident West Coast commercial fishery participants. By design, the harbor primarily supports lower volume, higher value (price per pound) fisheries, such as Chinook (king) salmon, Dungeness crab, and albacore tuna. It is described as a “pink fish” port, largely dependent on salmon for its commercial and recreational fisheries.

First opened in 1964 for commercial and recreational vessels, the harbor quickly replaced the Santa Cruz Wharf as the center of local fisheries. Through the 1970s and 1980s, commercial fisheries grew locally and nationally in response to federal policy to “Americanize” fisheries in coastal waters. The Santa Cruz Port District supported this growth by developing fishery infrastructure, including a fish offloading pier and buying station, cold storage, and an ice plant.

By the early 1990s, there were approximately 200 resident commercial fishing vessels at SCH; many more used the harbor to deliver their catch, re-provision or take refuge from sometimes dangerous seas. However, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, a combination of regulatory, economic and environmental factors had led to the downsizing of the state’s fisheries, including those at SCH.

Currently, SCH has about 40 resident vessels and skippers, 12 of them full-time. Another 80 non-resident vessels utilize the harbor each year. One resident receiver and another 35 receivers buy the catch landed at SCH. Most of the catch is trucked to processors, restaurants, and grocers within California. About 20 businesses within one mile of the harbor and many more elsewhere in Santa Cruz County provide supporting goods and services.

Some of the key regulatory, economic and environmental factors that fishery participants, and in turn the support businesses, have had to adapt to in recent years are:

- seasonal and area closures of fishing grounds and increasingly strict quotas for some species;
- markedly increased fuel prices coupled with dockside fish prices that have not kept pace;
- environmental variability, affecting where and when the fish are.

In combination, these factors affect the economic viability of fishing operations and related businesses, and influence where, when and how fishing and landings occur. Understanding how

these work together is key to predicting the impacts of management on fishing communities *and* how fisheries and fishery participants will respond to change.

For further information on the Santa Cruz Fishing Community Profile or the FCP, please contact Carrie Pomeroy at cmpomeroy@ucdavis.edu.