

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Felix Cox (FC)

INTERVIEWERS: David Todd (DT) and David Weisman (DW)

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TRANSCRIBERS: Lacy Goldsmith and Robin Johnson

REEL: 2077 (1<sup>st</sup> of two, followed by reel 2078)

Please note that videos include roughly 60 seconds of color bars and that numbers correlate with the time codes on the VHS tape copy of the interview. "Misc." typically refers to miscellaneous off-camera conversations or background noise.

DT: My name is David Todd. It's February 23, the year 2000 and we're down in the Municipal Harbor at Aransas Pass. And I'm speaking for the Conservation History Association of Texas. And interviewing Felix Cox who's a fisherman here and has been involved with conserving fish and harvesting fish for many years. And I wanted to thank you for taking the time to talk to us.

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FC: Quite welcome. Quite welcome, David.

DT: Thank you.

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FC: Glad—glad to be able to do participate.

DT: I thought we might start with your early days as a child and how you first became exposed to fishing and the outdoors.

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FC: Okay. Well I was born in the lower Carolinas on the North and South Carolina border, right on the sea coast there. And I started fishing at a very early age, around seven or eight years old, I guess, piddling in the water then. And—and then, by the time I was about nine or ten, my neph—my nephew and I used to trawl for shrimp with a hand sane in the—in the marshes and in the creeks and make us a little spending money that way. And then I guess by—by about the time I was a young teenager, twelve or thirteen, I was an entrepreneur by then, I guess you might call it because I had made it my business to salvage old boats and—and fix them up and have myself a boat at all times. There we'd—we'd have

the remnants of hurricanes over on the dump, as we call it. And I'd go scrounge through them and find me a—a good boat and fix it up and—and then get a set or oars. And then get together enough money to buy a gill net and then in my after-hours, after school, I'd set my gill net out and make two or three dollars doing that. And that's—that's pretty good change back them. A couple of dollars then was probably about like twenty-five or thirty today. And—and anyway by—by the time I was oh, eighteen or nineteen and out of high school, went to work at a supermarket first and—and found out that that was not my line of work. Poor—poor—poor pay. Extremely poor pay there. So my brother was shrimping in the Gulf of Mexico then over working off of Campeche, Mexico. And I begged him to take me along because I had fishing in my blood since being a child. And he finally agreed. He was reluctant at first because it's a dangerous business and—and have to travel long distances in rough weather and anyway finally reluctantly, reluctantly, he took me over to Campeche, Mexico with him and we went—went down to Fort Myers, Florida and left there and traveled across the Gulf, about a three day run. And we was trolling for shrimp and we'd stay gone about fifty to sixty days at a—at a stint. And we'd have provisions brought in occasionally by other boats and we'd ship our shrimps back by boats coming in—there were boats coming and going most all the time. And it was—it was a kind of way of life with shrimpers then to work the Campeche grounds and anyway, from there, I—I guess maybe a year and a half or two years into the Campeche fishery, they gave me a boat to run. They thought I was probably qualified to run a boat of my own as captain. And being only nineteen or twenty years old, I think that was a dire mistake on the part of the owners because ultimately what happened I—I lost that boat in the—in the Yucatan Straits between the Yucatan and Cuba. And that was my first casualty in the business and so afterwards, we went back to Florida and shrimped over there a little while longer. And then my brother and I came to Texas to make the Texas summer season. And—and I met my first wife at that point when—after—after we'd been here maybe two or three months, I met my first wife. And elected to stay here in Texas. And I've been in Texas ever since. Initially in

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the shrimping business. And, from there, I stayed in the shrimping business for several more years, for maybe another twenty years or so. And then eventually gravitated over into the reef fish fishery which is a red snapper and grouper and—and such fish as that. And I think I love fishing better than shrimping because it's—it's different and—and it's a little more titillating, I think. And so I've been there for some time now. And—and that—currently I'm still doing it. Still fishing. Reel—old reels like you see on the back of my boat.

DT: Can you tell us about the tackle you use?

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FC: Well...

DT: Before you do that, why don't we go back to the very early days when you were fishing with fill nets and what is a gill net, how do you use it? Why were they outlawed?

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FC: Okay. Well a gill net is a—is a couple of ropes with webbing stretched between them and the top rope has corks on it to float it up and the bottom rope has leads on it to hold it on the bottom. And the webbing is much like a—a fence, like a chain link fence except it's made out of twine instead of metal and the fish swim into the gill net and—and entangle themselves. Usually the head goes in up to the gills and that's where they stop and then they can't back out. And that was a—a—a way of fishing for—for—forever, I guess, until most recent years when they outlawed it. The managers of the fishery claimed that—that it was non-selective and—and, to some extent, they're—they're correct. And so anyway, we used to use those nets—it's much easier to catch fish with a gill net than—than trying to entice a fish to bite a line. And so that was the preferred tackle back then and, sure enough, we used to catch some pretty good loads of fish with them too. And—either out in the ocean or—or in the canals. I can remember several times getting five or six hundred pounds in a night myself as a young fellow. And the old-timers that were really professionals back then that worked out on the beach, they could load up, so to speak, thousands of pounds. And so any—anyway, as I said before, that's been—that method has been outlawed gradually ever so slowly. In Texas, probably about twenty years ago and then the various other states, Louisiana and Mississippi and some of the most recent to—to ban gill nets. They're...

DT: And then later on you became a shrimper. What sort of shrimping equipment would you use?

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FC: Well you use what's called an—an otter trawl. You—you—if you're shrimping in the Gulf or in—out in the ocean, you need a fairly large boat to do that generally and at least—at least a fifty foot boat. From there on up to seventy and eighty foot. And now they have them up to a hundred foot. And—and we use—back in the old days, we used a single otter trawl which is a big set of what we call doors. That's—door being something shaped like a door but having a—an iron runner on the bottom of it that—that treads along the bottom of—skims along the bottom and at an angle much like my hands are projecting and—and opening the net. And the net being shaped like a funnel and the rear of the funnel being the cod(?) end there—where all the shrimp accumulate. And shrimp and other things that it catches. And—and it throws along the bottom at about two or three miles and the shrimp—you'll pull a tickler chain, what's called a tickler chain that's in advance of the net that makes the shrimp jump up and, as they jump up, then the net goes up under them and catches them, you know, and—and you troll that along till you feel like you've got a load and then you pick them up with a winch and pick the doors up to the end of a boon and then you have a line that's called a lazy line that you pull that forward with the winch, bring the cod(?) end alongside the boat and then you use another line to lift it up on the boat

and—and a tripping device—a set of knots with—with a rope that releases the bag and you dump it all on the deck and cut it out and there—there you've got your catch there. And...

DT: Tell me about these trolling nets. I understand in recent years they've put turtle excluder devices on them. Where would that go and how does that work?

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FC: It goes—it's in the body of the net, down next to the cod(?) end, down next to the bag of the net and it's a device that's a grid that's set in at an angle so as the—as the water pressure's advancing across this grid, any turtle that would hit it or—or get in the net would be ejected either through the top or the bottom, depending on how the device is installed. And it's been a lot of controversy and it's—about the turtle excluder devices in shrimp nets. Of course, any time you ask a fisherman to cut a hole in his net and—and release some of his catch, you—you're going to probably going have a fight on your hands. You know, that's essentially what the turtle excluder did. It demanded that fishermen make an—make an incision in their net and anything over a certain size is ejected through this excluder device. And, of course, there's—there's two sides to the story. No question about it. You know, the people interested in conserving turtles which we all are, to some extent, were int—they were aware that shrimpers occasionally caught turtles and—and that does happen. It does happen occasionally and, in certain areas, moreso than others. However, there's very—very—my experience has been, at least, that in—in deeper waters there's been very little interaction between shrimpers and turtles in the several years that I spent offshore. But now getting up into shallower waters, it—the—the occurrence is more frequent. And so there—there probably is at least some need for them in shallow waters I would say.

DT: What do you think of this recent proposal to create a reserve close to the shore to protect some of the turtles? Do you think that would be meaningful or not?

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FC: It—it may be meaningful to the turtles to some extent but the—the sociological and the economic disadvantages of it to—to fishermen, at least, is considerable, in my opinion. And the—the consequences of having a closed area, there—there—there's some underlying consequences that I feel like have probably not been thought out enough at this time at least. Because there—there—there's just so many things involved in closing an area that—that's on the surface doesn't—it doesn't appear on the surface. For instance, if you close an area there—there's always this potential. This—the Gulf is a vast area and monitoring such a closed area is extremely difficult and fishermen, like anyone else, have a penchant for taking advantage of areas that have been shut off to—to use. You know, it's—for instance, if I were a fisherman and I were encountering a closed area, for one thing, closed areas were probably a—a—accumulate more fish or more shrimp or—or whatever marine life there is than—than an open area. So they're going to be more abundant there and there's going to be a strong incentive for people to poach in these areas. And until they—now they have a

way available to handle this but the—it's draconian, in my opinion. It's—it intrudes—heavily intrudes on people's rights to privacy and—but the—there's a device that's operated through a satellite surveillance. It's a—it's a honing device, so to speak, that they can install on your vessel. It's called a vessel monitoring system and they're proposing to monitor these closed areas using these vessel monitoring systems. And it's a—it's a—again, it's a device that the fishermen initially, at least, will be compelled to buy himself. Be—be mandatory that he buy it and—and then when you leave the dock you would have to turn it on and it sends a signal back to a central monitoring station, monitored by the National Marine Fisheries Service and lets them know where you're at—exactly where you're at ever so often, like every three or four minutes. And this, in my opinion, this is extremely intrusive on the—on the

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rights to privacy of individuals not to—not to—I personally wouldn't want to—to do anything in violation of the—the laws that they have but it's just one step towards losing our freedom, in my opinion. And so I'm opposed to these closed areas and I'm certainly opposed to the vessel monitoring program that they have—that they're contemplating.

DT: Your real line of work right now is reef fishing. Can you tell about how you go about that, kind of tackle you use, where you go?

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FC: Okay. Yes, that's—that's true. I—I consider myself to be a reef fisherman now. I don't shrimp anymore and we—we use a little short rods and reels that we call bandits. Strange name for one but any—anyway that's what they call them. They're—they're—it's a—it's a hand operated reel and actually the ones that I use are about, I guess, maybe three foot long, the rod section, and a bicycle. It's derived from the components of a bicycle and we operate it by hand like this and crank up the line. And—and have a big weight on the end of it. And—and out on this end of this rod is a block and the line goes from the reel through the block and down into the water and—and anyway, we have several hooks like about a thirty hook rig is what I use and they're about six inches apart on little short leaders with a hook on the end of them. And about six inches apart on this vertical line and we find wrecked or rock or some other obstruction and—and hover the

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boat over it or either anchor the boat on it and drop this contraption, if you will, down onto it and catch fish. The fish congregate around these obstructions. They—they just inherently, out in the vast expanses of the Gulf, mud bottom, you know, if there's an obstruction or wreck or something they just—it's like a magnet to them and they congregate around them and—and our job is to locate—as fishermen, is to locate these wrecks, you know, and—and harvest fish off of them. And...

DT: I've heard that there have been some proposals to increase opportunities to reef-fishing by dropping old oil rigs and other wrecks...

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FC: Yes there—yes there have.

DT: Have those worked well or...

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FC: They work. Absolutely. They do work. They work too well in my opinion. I—I—again, I have a kind of radical opinion on some of these things that may not be in line with the mainstream. It's not—not in the mainstream. My—my thinking. My—my philosophy on this is that if humans know where fish are, they're probably going to catch them and as the fishers who are advocates of—of creating more reefs, I feel like that's the wrong way to go myself because that—that's similar—when you create a reef like that, when officials create a reef they—they might as well notify the world where the fish are because the reefs will attract the fish. And then the people will harvest them. So that leaves no place for the fish to hide. If you have enough reefs—and oil platforms is—is another area along this line, you know, the—the proliferation of oil platforms offshore has given fish a place to hide around until they're caught. And that's part of the problem. They—almost no place to hide anymore and the fish have very little opportunity to hide and—and do their thing without humans knowing where they're at. So...

DT: Maybe you could tell us about some of the fish finding sonar that you use that makes it difficult for fish...

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FC: Makes it—that's true—some of the—some of the electronic equipment that we have and use makes it rough on the fish and makes it easy for the fishermen but makes it tough on the fish because that—that enhances the opportunity for fishermen to catch them. And we have—we have sonars which is an oscillating beam ejecting device there that—much like a radar. It shoots out a beam, you know, and then—and gets a—it's a sound wave is what it is and gets the reflection of it back and—and it's translated through electronic equipment and displayed on a screen like a television screen and if there's a fish anywhere within six hundred or a thousand foot of your beam, you can more than likely locate him and again, that's great for fisherman in a way but it's—it's kind of rough on—on the fish. And so it has its pros and cons, you know. Modern technology does great things in—in lots of instances but, in the long run, we may pay for it on—on other fronts. And also we have location—position locating devices that—especially now with the advent of the Global Positioning Service, the GPS, Global Positioning System, I—I guess they call it which is another satellite based technology where it—you have a little

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instrument on your boat that will receive a signal from a satellite and—and it can calculate it to, in some instances, to within about fifteen foot of the exact position that you're at. And if you have that accuracy on the water, you can—you can—the repeatability of you being able to go back to a spot that you've been to before is just certain. And, again, great for the fishermen but not too good for fish trying to hide. That's true.

DT: Are there other factors that put more pressure on the fish that make them harder to find and catch and preserve over the long haul?

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FC: And—and you say other factors that—that makes them harder to...

DT: The size of boats, the number of boats...

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FC: Well the boats si—in the reef fish fishery, I don't think there's been any size increase because there—there's not been much incentive, especially in the Gulf of Mexico reef fish fishery, or any of the other South Atlantic either because regulations are pretty tough on—on all fisheries anymore and the—and the injection of capital has been—has been quailed a good bit. And so the boat size has not increased any to my knowledge. And...

DT: Is there the kind of subsidies for fishers as there used to be for shrimpers?

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FC: Well subsidies per se I—I—I'm not aware of any real subsidies except maybe the—the fact that you don't have to pay tax on your diesel fuel. Now I say I'm not aware of any. I do know that there are—or have been in the passed some subsidy that have interested fishermen in—in coming into the business. I'm not sure anymore if any of those are available cause I—I privately haven't taken advantage of any of them except for the diesel fuel tax—the, you know, the fact that we don't have to pay tax on the diesel fuel. Any other subsidies I'm not aware of at this time.

DT: Could you tell us about some of the risks for the fishermen? Maybe you can tell us how you arrived at getting this boat? I understood that you had a run-in with a storm once.

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FC: Oh yes that—that's the—was my second or third run-in with—my second or third casualty, I should say. There—second for sure. Yes, there was some bad weather, some extremely bad weather and I had a brand new boat that I'd lost—I had built in 1985. It was a nice little thirty-five foot Lafitte style skip and, at the time, I was using it for shrimping and—and sometimes for reef fish fishing and we got caught in a—a norther in the first days of November, 1985. And I had had the boat built brand new in May of that year so it was only like maybe five months old and it was late in the evening and I had my son on the boat with me and—and we were aware that a front was coming in and—and, as a matter of fact,

the captain of the Mattie-Grace boat that I have now had—just prior to—to my little circumstance there had—had came on in the jetties. He was up closer to the jetties than I was and came on in the jetties and radioed me that the—that this norther was hitting a little harder than we had anticipated. And so we got our nets up and—and started steaming toward Aransas Pass. We were about two hours normal steam from Aransas Pass and it was late in the evening and as it got darker and got rougher and, sure enough, the front hit real hard and it was doing probably thirty or forty, maybe forty-five mile an hour and this boat—this little, small boat is not capable of handling much of that. So I elected to go over inside what we call the gullies which is right up close to the beach. There's a—there's a deep trough of water up close to our gulf beaches here that's—and known as the gullies and I figured I'd get some protection from the swell, from the—from the seas, you know, there. And I did. But as it got darker, I couldn't see as well and I had my son shining the spotlight and I would zag out to the offshore bar and then back in to the—to the inshore gully and back out until I'd feel seas coming over the boat and then, at some point, my son opened the back door and said dad, there's a awful lot of water in this boat. And he says, I think we're in trouble. And I said, well hold the wheel just a minute and I slowed the engine down and I opened the back door and looked out myself and we were half full of water and—and I—I told him, I said, son we're—

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we're going to lose this boat. And I says, hang on I'm going to—I'm going to head it—I'm going to try to drive it up on the beach if I can and so I turned it straight inshore and goosed it a little bit and I was going to—and my intention was to—just as fast as I could to get it straight on in, on the beach—we were probably three or four hundred foot offshore, at the time, offshore of the beach, running up along the beach and—and I hit the throttle and goosed it and when I did, a seas came over the stern of it and buried it right there and—and there we were sunk. And there was enough air in the fuel tank that it held the bow afloat but the stern was sunk and the seas were piling over the stern of it and we tried to leave the boat through the door, through the rear door and we couldn't because the seas were just kept knocking the door back in on us and instinctively that part of the boat was sunk. And so I—I told my son, I said, we going to have to go out these front windows and so we opened the front windows. They—they lifted up like this on a hinge assembly and—and I—I told him to put on a life jacket now and—and get—crawl out of one of these windows and I'll be right behind you. And he—he tried to argue with me like he usually does and I said, for once son, don't argue with me. Put a life jacket—he says, dad I can make it without the life jacket. Put a life jacket on and get the hell out of here and I'll be right behind you. And he—so he did. He finally did and he scooted out the window and I put one on and I scooted out behind him and we—we came up like that and—and he hauled buggy to the beach and I—I—I was hollering at him. I said, son wait on me and he just dug in a little deeper. He looked back on—I think he said, every man for himself. So we—we—we made it to the beach and lost that boat and—and that's how I—how I came about the Mattie-Grace. I



knew that I—I was not ready to leave the fishing business and—and there we were with no boat and we had just paid \$65,000 for

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that boat and didn't have a—one cent of insurance on it and my wife almost went into a shock over this and—and it affected me quite heavily too but next day we—we found the boat next day. We had to charter a plane—or two days later we—we had to charter a plane and found the boat up in the surf and—and tried to raise it and—and couldn't and I ended up selling the boat for a dollar just to relieve myself of the liability of it. And anyway, a friend of mine was running the Mattie Grace at the time and he had come down from Waco and was interested in being a fisherman and after about a year of having the Mattie Grace, he found that he was, in fact, not a fisherman. And he agreed to sell the Mattie Grace to me on time. And so I started making a thousand dollar a month payments on the Mattie Grace. Gave him a five thousand dollar down payment and I still have a note outstanding on the boat that I lost at the bank, of some eight hundred dollars a month and so by—from the proceeds from fishing with the Mattie Grace I ended up paying the Mattie Grace off and the boat that I lost oh, in about seven years. And so it took a while but finally cleared out on that and—and then starting making some money after that, you know. So we were back up on our feet. So it has ups and downs and this—this fishing business can be great at times and it can certainly have some down sides to it. Some—some—it's a roller coaster ride is what it is.

DT: How about if you tell us about some of the good times and some of the not-so-good times.

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FC: Well this was—I just told you about some of the not-so-good times. Now I can tell you about some of the good times is after I bought the Mattie Grace and finally got it paid for. We began real—as a matter of fact, before I ever got the boat paid for we had started to realize some good times because we had several years of good luck. And I was learning more and more about the red snapper fishery, in particular, which I had not been heavily involved in prior to buying the Mattie Grace. I'd piddled at it a little bit, you know, from time to time during my shrimping career. And—and once I got the Mattie Grace and—and got it maybe halfway through paying for it and had cleared out the note on the other boat that we had owed on, then we started realizing a little profit and I—I could be adventuresome a little bit and I started spending more time and effort chasing red snapper. And learning more and more—although I had several pla—I knew several places where to catch them, you know. I kind of made it my business to find more and more places where red snapper lived. And—and so I—I did and—and we—I guess about 1987 or 1988 we—we started getting—getting in the money there on the red snapper and started really making some good profit on—on—on red snapper. We found several places offshore that apparently no one had ever hit before and—and we got several six and seven thousand pound loads in short notice, you know, in just a few days—in a couple of days. And, at that

time, we were getting about three dollars a pound for a fish so there was some profit to be made but it—certainly was not without a lot of effort to because I spent many days, weeks, and sometimes months looking to find maybe just one of these fishing places. Like a boat that may have sunk years ago and you may have had some indication or some inkling of an idea where it was at but you didn't know exactly where. That meant you had to perform a search on it to—to—to try to locate it. And I

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did several of these. Many a—many hour I've sat up at that old steering wheel there and almost fell asleep going back and forth in a grid, working a grid, looking at your electronic equipment, you know, and—and running down a lower end line and then moving over half a microsecond and another line for a mile back and forth, burning fuel and as oftentimes—I remember one place, in particular, I looked for for a month and never made a dime during that—spending money—spending—kind of like—kind of like drilling for oil, I guess, you know, when a—when a driller drills well after well, when he finally hits, you know, he can pay for it all then, if he hits. Well this one particular place I looked for for about a month and I'd given up. I just disgusted. I knew it had to be there. And I went on about my business and several months later, maybe three or four months later, I was just steaming by that area and I saw a little something peculiar looking on my fish finding equipment that showed a little trace of hard bottom on the—on the bottom of the sounding and just out of—just out of happen chance I said, I'm going to make a turnaround just see. So and I turned around and went right straight across that wreck that I'd been looking for for all that time and we loaded up off of it. We loa—and we loaded up several more times off of it there. And so that's kind of the way this business goes, you know. You go through good times and bad times. You go through dry spells. Back in the early '80's with the little (?) that I had, I went through some dry times and thought I was going to lose everything financially. And then you go through these good times like it—when—and then when you go through the loss of a boat, that's another bad time and makes you wonder. And then—and then you'll have a great time like, you know, like finding all these fish that I'm—I'm indicating to you. And—and I've gone through several instances of that, you know, finding real good fishing spots and getting maybe a—a total of forty or fifty thousand pounds after several trips on them, you know. And so those are some of the good times. And then, I guess, in about 1991, the federal government decided to impose some awfully harsh and—and

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strict regulations on reef fish, on the red snapper and other reef fish and there have been no good times since then but...

DT: What kind of regulations did they place on the fishing?

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FC: Well I—I guess the most damaging to the fishermen was the advent of what we call the derby fishery which what it amounted to, they—they had determined that red snapper had

been over-fished and so they had put—put regulations in place to—to allocate just a certain amount. Put what they call a TAC, a Total Allowable Catch, on the fishery. And it—I—I forget what the exact amount was. I—I believe it was three million pounds for the whole Gulf of Mexico was the first TAC that we had. And so what that resulted in was—as a matter of fact, the first year it—it—there was hardly any effect but by the second year, we started seeing the—people trying to inject effort and capital into their operations to capitalize on this TAC, understanding that—that if they didn't get the fish themselves, someone else would. You know, when you're limited—when the whole fishery is limited to a set—set harvest that creates the incentive for everyone to up their opportunities to catch these fish, you know, to make sure that they get their fair share before the season closes. It imposes a closed season is what happens.

DT: Like a race.

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FC: And—and that's exactly what it's called—a race for fish. The total—setting—setting the total allowable catch created a closed season when that catch was met. And—and this, in turn, created this race for the fish which we call the derby. And that had several ill effects to it. By—by 1992, we were—I believe it was '92—it was either '92 or '93, we were in the dead heat of a derby and—and—and one of those years it—it amounted to our season lasting only fifty some odd days before we'd caught our TAC—our Total Allowable Catch. And so fishermen—see and this happened—realized that they were going to have to inject more effort and more—more capital into their fishery if they wanted to get their—again if they wanted to get their fair share. That means you got to take on a bigger crew or—or have a bigger boat, a faster boat or something, you know, to—to get your fair share. And it just snowballs into a—a—a just a bad situation and it's been that way ever since the early '90's and unfortunately, these good times that I mentioned earlier the—as I said, there have been none of those in the last eight or ten years. And...

DT: Can you describe the first day of a derby? What happens?

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FC: First day, well yes I—I guess so. The—the season opens. Well you prepare for it in advance, of course. You get all your supplies say—say, for instance, if you know you—your season is going to open on the first and you've got an allocated amount of fish to catch then you get all your supplies ready and—and you get your crew lined up and take on groceries, buy some fuel and every other thing you need and—and you will probably will leave out a day or two before your season opens but one thing you may want to do, you may want to go out there and do a little testing, what we call testing which is use—maybe just use two or three hooks, you know, and go on some of these fishing places and make sure the fish are going to be there when it comes time to catch them. And then when as—as—it's kind of a shotgun start. Soon as the bell rings you—you go to it. And some people don't wait till the bell rings un—unfortunately but anyway, nowadays our—our season opens at—at midday

on the opening day and it used to open at midnight of the day that—that it opened. And so you just—you catch them—you—you—you ready—you're sitting dead on ready whenever the season opens and you start catching fish just as fast as you can and you just—lots of people just throw them in the hole any old way, you know, throw them in the hole guts in and throw a little bit of ice on them and then run back to the dock as fast as they can and unload them. When you get your trip limit—we have trip limits too, you know, two thousand pounds per trip and some boats have only two hundred pounds per trip. And whenever you get your trip limit then you—you steam back to the dock as fast as you can and then unload the fish and then you steam back offshore back to the fishing grounds and try to get you another load as fast as you can and...

DT: How far offshore would you be going?

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FC: Sometimes only twenty or thirty miles but that's a minimum. You—you—I have to sometimes go as far as a hundred miles down range to—to where there's good fish at. But most of the time the medium range, I say, is about fifty miles. And so that's a—that's a pretty good steam offshore and a pretty good steam back in and a lot of wasted effort there and a lot of wasted supplies and fuel and stuff, you know, as opposed to—to being allowed to catch, for instance, what your boat will hold rather than making these little short trips back and for like that. If you were allowed to say, for instance, once a week just load the wagon once a week and come in, you know, and—and then stay in and wait till the—the time came again. There's several ways that this can be done differently and—and more economically feasible but, unfortunately, we're hung up in this old derby race and—and can't seem to interest managers into changing it. I...

DT: It reminds me of the 55 mile an hour speed limit where nobody really wants to comply. Is there much incentive to poach or cheat, go a little early, stay a little late...

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FC: Oh yes, sure. Well there's not—I don't know, staying a little late is kind of—is extremely risky, I mean, because once the season closes, you know, it would be awfully easy to catch a fellow out there then but, and of course, it's easy to get because it's easy to get because the coast guard is pretty—pretty strong on these fisheries issues like this. They—they enforce them pretty heavily and, for instance, back in the beginning days of this derby fishery, it was—it wasn't—it wasn't uncommon to get boarded every trip by the coast guard.

DT: What would they check?

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FC: Well generally they would check your safety equipment but I—I think it was pretty well understood back then that they were checking your—your fishing operation because and—and they would. They would check your fishing—your fish, the size of your fish and—and they would try to determine whether or not you may have more fish than—than what you

were allowed. Of course, that's rather—rather difficult because it's hard to weigh your fish out—out there and know exactly how many you have and so, as a matter of fact, that was a difficult job for fishermen too, knowing exactly when to stop because—because we had no way of weighing them. It was just—pretty hard to weigh a fish with the boat rocking back and forth like that, you know, you may—you're certainly going to get an inaccurate weight. And so anyway, when the Coast Guard would board, sometimes they would check for illegal aliens and sometimes for drugs and sometimes they'd check your fish and—and sometimes they'd check for everything. It's just depend, you know, but in the beginning days of this derby fishery, the National Marine Fisheries Service, we feel, was probably trying to—to make a—a—put a strong incentive there for fishermen not to cheat. So they—they were actively boarding boats just all—almost every trip. And so that lasted for a while but it's—here lately, that's been relaxed a good deal. It's been relaxed a good deal.

DT: Maybe you can tell us about some of the alternatives to the derby that you think might work better?

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FC: Well yeah—yes there's two or three alternatives that—that I have considered myself and that—that the Council has considered, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, has considered some of these alternatives. One of the favorite ones being the individual transferable quota system which is, I think, probably will be the thing of the future. I—I—I hope it is at least because I—I think it has lots of potential. As a matter of fact, I know it has lots of potential to it and in—it involves a system whereas—where—where you have an overall quota of fish. That currently is being—is common property, you know, in that all the fishermen have to share in based on some trip limit or something similar to that. As an alternative, the individual transferable quota would allocate each fisherman an individual share of the fish to catch at his liberty. And there's several ways that this could be determined — what — what an individual's share might be but generally these programs are based on a fisherman's historical catch records. In other words, say, for instance, if I had averaged catching 25,000 pounds of fish a year, you know, over the last ten years, then I would be allocated 25,000 pounds of fish, you know, to catch each year at my discretion, when I want to catch them and—and there are lots of advantages to it. It would—it would end the race for the fish. That's the

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main advantage. Ending the race for fish would be certainly preferable than allowing it to continue like it's doing now, you know, because there's so many downsides to this derby fishery.

DT: Would it make safer for you, you wouldn't have to go in high seas...

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FC: Oh yeah. That's—that's one of the—one of the best things right there. One of the—one of the—one of the best—one of the most advantageous parts of an individual transferable quota program would—would—would be the way it addresses the safety concerns that we have because with the derby fishery, the incentive is strong to go at all times, you know, regardless of weather conditions. Just to go, go, go, go and—and it creates some real safety concerns. And we've had—we've had several incidences of people being hurt. Fortunately, to my knowledge, there have been no direct casualties, human casualties, related to the derby. Now there may have been somebody to have—I—I'm not aware of but there have been several sinkings and—and lots of incidences of people being hurt and having their boats damaged and certainly undue stress put on the vessels and the crew because of the derby fishery.

DT: Could you give an example of a boat lost or a person hurt from the derby?

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FC: Yeah we had—as a matter of fact, just this last season there was a boat over Louisiana that was lost because of it. They had a—they had about a ten foot sea running out there on the—I think it was the third day of the season and a boat named the Bits and Pieces was lost. He shouldn't have been out in that kind of weather and probably would not have been out in that weather had it not been for this race. And two good friends of mine, as a matter of fact, back in about '96, I believe it was, we had a little short opener, a thirty-six hour opener, and they elected to go out in about fifteen foot seas and one of them got part of his boat tore—torn off and—and the other one got banged up against the cabin of the boat and—and got his ribs all messed up and he was stowed up for weeks and—and just foolish things like that, you know, that—that happen from—from these races. And that ocean, that the Gulf of Mexico or any other body of water is not a place to—to be playing with things like races. It—it might be fine to race out there if you're a sportsman or something, you know, but in—in a—in a—in a—in a business sense, it's not—it's not necessary and should not be necessary and it's certainly not practical. It's a very dangerous business, to say the least, in—in the best of circumstances. It's dangerous. And when you add the element of—of time constraints, that just doubles your danger and something needs to be dealt with, no question.

DT: Are there some other things that might lower the risk for the fishermen and maybe conserve the fish as well?

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FC: Other than the individual transferable quota. Well I—I—one thing that comes to mind is—is really something that I ventured to the Council myself is a—allowing each vessel to have two trips per month at their respected trip levels. And that's—that's not an individual quota program but it's something that could be used in the interim and it would not be—maybe not as good as a program as an individual transferable quota program but that would—it would eliminate the derby and—and allow for—for a lot safer working

conditions and allow for more conservation measures to be put in place, you know, I mean, fishermen could—could address the conservation issue that—that—that’s another segment of this thing, you know, about racing for fish. Your conservation is—is laid to the side generally so you...

DT: How do you mean?

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FC: Well you just—you just—there’s no incentive to conserve—you—for one thing, when the season closes, that’s when the real abuse comes in—into play because if you have one fishery that’s open and—and exposed to this race for the fish, as soon as you’ve exhausted that and it’s closed, then most fishermen need to work doing something and they’ll go out and try to fish for some other species and, in so doing, then they have to throw away the by-catch of, for instance, red snapper. Red snapper, vermilion snapper, amber jack and groupers, these are all reef fish and they hang out on the same reef and then lots of times you’ll catch them all together, you know, as you’re fishing for one, you’ll catch by-catch of the other fish. And if you have one fishery open and the other closed, that means you have to throw away the fish that’s in the closed season when you’re out fishing. And so that’s a—that’s a waste, an absolute waste and there’s a lot of that going on right now and has been for the last several years, for the last eight or ten years, ever since this derby fishery was imposed on red snapper because red snapper is the closed fishery. Now like, for instance, right now, red snapper’s closed and if I went out fishing for vermilion snapper, I’d have to throw all my red snapper away.

DT: And the snapper you throw back, do they usually die?

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FC: Depending on the water depth but anything over about fifty foot of water, you can expect—you can expect mortality and the deeper the more. The deeper the water, the—the higher the mortality rate and usually we work in two to three hundred foot of water and—and deeper. And so yes, there’s a high mortality, extremely high mortality rate to—on releases.

(misc)

DW: What is the by-catch usually?

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FC: It—it depends on the circumstances. It depends on the location. It depends on the species you may be talking about but—for instance, working vermilion snapper, the by-catch of red snapper probably averages 25% of the catch. If you catch a—a—in most cases that I’ve found—my—myself personally, now some other fisherman may have different levels of by-catch but, in the fishing that I’ve done for vermilion snapper, on the average, I would say 25% of the harvest rate would be of red snapper and those have to be thrown

away. To catch a thousand pounds of vermilion snapper, I'd probably have to destroy 250 pounds of red snapper.

DT: What about if you're fishing for shrimp or something where you use a net, is the by-catch higher?

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FC: They have—there is by-catch. There's no question about it but by-catch—the by-catch is—is in shrimping is of—of a variety of species other than shrimp, you know, and—and there's, at times—at times, the by-catch is high and, at times, there's not—there's very little by-catch. I've—I've seen occasions where in my shrimping career, where I'm—I might not have 10% by-catch and sometimes no by-catch but then, at other times, I've seen by-catch as high as several hundred percent, you know, maybe a hundred pounds of shrimp and a thousand pounds of croakers or something like that. But that's not the—that's not typical. I mean, generally if I get in an area like that when I was shrimping, I would leave it and try to find an area where the shrimp were thicker and then the by-catch was less. And on average, I—I—I don't know exactly what the average by-catch level is on shrimping but I hear reports of various level. I hear—hear reports of several hundred percent and—and then I hear conflicting reports, you know, that are much less than that so it's—it's extremely difficult to say what the medium by-catch level is in shrimping but—and I—I guess I'd be reluctant to venture a—a number as to a

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medium by-catch. I—I—all I can say is that I've seen it from—in variant levels, anywhere from—from 1% to 1000%, you know. At different times, it's—it's different.

DT: You mentioned shrimping and trawling, what do you think about these license buy-backs that they've been doing for Bay Shrimpers?

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FC: For shrimping?

DT: Yeah, is that an effective thing?

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FC: Well it's a—it's—it's an effective way, I think, to control the exp—control any expansion in the fishery, yes. And it—it's probably better than, I guess, maybe it's better than—than allowing the fishery to just be wide open, you know, to anybody's entrance to it. But there's some—I feel like there's some downsides to that and some up and downsides to it and I—keep in mind that I haven't participated in the bay fishery in several years and I'm probably not as familiar with it as—as I should be. But—but my understanding is that—that they're not allowing any new entrance into the fishery at all. That if you sell a license, that it has to be to someone that's already in the business and that—and—in my opinion, has a



downside to it because I think there should be some allowance for new entry into the fishery because there obviously people that would like to be shrimpers. Maybe not very many and maybe they may not be—be very smart if they want to be a shrimper but there probably some people that would like to be, you know, but—and I think that prov—provision should be made for that. You know, and—and there may be some provision but if there—there is, I'm not aware of it. But the—anyway, the license buy-back program, I think, is—is the Parks & Wildlife's way of—of dealing with the shrimp fishery and trying to—contain it within reasonable parameters, you know, of not allowing too much expansion in it and—and—and I guess there's some pros and cons to that, you know, and—I don't know. I just—I have a little problem with these constraints on—on fishermen in general but I realize that—that some constraints are necessary. That we can't all exploit the resource at the same level we have in the past and expect it to last and so we have to have some humane way of—of dealing with it. I—privately I think that the shrimp fishery could probably be handled with an individual transferable program quo—quota program also. But most shrimpers probably would not agree with that right now. They would not be receptive to it because it's a—it's a new animal. It's a—it's not clearly defined what a—an individual transferable quota is. In lots of people's minds it's not clearly defined. In my mind, I feel comfortable with my definition of it and in the way I see it being, you know, but lots of fishermen are not quite comfortable yet with the idea of allocating them a specific amount of fish or shrimp to catch and that's it.

DT: Have the quotas been tried elsewhere with any success?

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FC: Some, some, some. Again, they're somewhat of a new animal. And—but yes they have been tried and with varying degrees of success. In the Pacific Northwest, the most recent one has been the sable fish halibut quota program, individual quota program and—and most people, especially those that are in the program, of course, are giving it rave reviews. And those that were excluded from the program think it's the sorriest thing that ever happened. So you can understand that I'm sure. And in the surf clam fishery on the East Coast, they—they've had a program in place there for several years now and it—it's—it's doing what it was intended to do although it was probably not an ideal—an ideally developed program. It's had some bad effects but it's—it has eliminated the expansion in the fishery and—and—and the over-capitalization. It's done that and also in the wreck fish fishery which was a—a strange fishery to begin with. They—they imposed a individual quota program in that fishery and it certainly quailed the over-capitalization and—and did several things. It—some good and some bad. And—so there has been—yes, there's been some experience with it in—in United States and there's been the experience with it overseas with it and especially in New Zealand. They've got practically all their fisheries under individual quota programs and it's just, in my opinion, it's—it's probably a—a—a humane way of dealing with the fact that we can't all participate.

DT: Why can't we all participate?

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FC: Well it's—well let me back up. I—I—I'll put it this way. We could all participate but if we did, you'd get about that much and you'd get about that much and I'd get about that much and there just wouldn't be enough to go around and make a profit off of. You know, I mean, it's just—makes common sense that as the resource dwindles unless we have some way of—of making it multiply with the human race and, unfortunately, the human race has been multiplying, has been expanding, has been growing, and so as there's more demand for the—for the product, it—it's gets over-exploited. And it's a renewable resource and it can only renew so fast and we, unfortunately, we've pushed it to the limit in its renewability. And it just can't—it can't replicate itself as fast as we demand it to. So—so there you go.

DT: Have you seen yields dropping over the years that you have been...

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FC: In a—in a—in a long-term trend, yes. Yes. Now in most recent years it's—it's fluctuated. It's kind of fluctuated. As—as management demands that less and less people utilize the resource, the—the—the resource expands for a period and then until people learn how to capitalize on how to steal it, if you will, and then it goes back down. And then—then as you put one program in place and people learn how to cheat on that program and then it goes back down. It's a—it's a—it's a see-saw, kind of like a see-saw, you know, it seems like. Unfortunately, fishermen, like all other human beings I think, if you put a—a roadblock up in front of them they'll probably figure some way to get around it eventually. It may take a year or two, three, four, they'll figure some way to catch that fish. If that fish is out there and human beings are here, they going to figure some way to catch him.

DT: Can you give me an example of ways that things get circumvented?

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FC: Why...

DT: The road block gets avoided?

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FC: Sure, sure, sure. I can probably give you several examples. I'm trying to think of a prime example. Oh my goodness. Well, well when they first—when they first put size limits in on red snapper, you weren't allowed to keep anything under, I think the first sizing was twelve inches. Well some of my fishing buddies, and myself included occasionally, what we would do would be those under twelve inches, we'd fillet them out and stick them in baggies and hide them in ice holes someplace and stick them in and eat them ourselves. So—so that's one way of doing it, you know. Then they put a—a restriction—a strong penalty against that, filleting fish on the boat, you know. And so that—that quailed that, by golly. That—that's one prime example, you know, of—of getting around a regulation. And oh, let's see if I

can think of some others here. Well, I can't think of anymore right off the top of my head but if—if you hadn't have asked me, I could have probably thought of ten.

(misc.)

DT: Do you find that some people are just losing patience with the business?

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FC: A lot of them are. Yeah, a lot of them are. Sure are. Sure are. For several—for several years, this—especially this reef fish fishery, for several years, this derby fishery, derby style of fishing has driven people nuts. I mean, it just drives them up against the wall because it—it—you get half the price that you ought to get for your fish and you waste twice the resources that you ought to and you're demanded to destroy your own livelihood out there in these—as I've indicated to you, when you're trying to catch other fish and throwing these away. And then the size limits, the unrealistic size limits and—and deep water, you should have no size limits to begin with. I've been an advocate of that for years and—and other people are coming around to that philosophy also to understanding that when a fish—a dead fish is a dead fish. You know, if you catch a—a—a 14  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch fish and throw him away to catch one that's 15 inches, what good have you done really? You know, if you—have you conserved anything if he's dead when you throw him away? You try for an in— $\frac{1}{4}$  of an inch longer fish and destroy—and you do that time and time again and you've—you've knocked your own self in the head, of course. And so—I guess I got off track. What—what—what was our topic there?

DT: You were talking about why people were leaving the business voluntarily?

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FC: Well—well being—being confronted with these sort of—of lose-lose situations like that time and time again disheartens a person. It has certainly disheartened me. I can remember so many times at—at the beginning of this red snapper derby, going offshore, trying to fish for some other species and destroying tons of red snapper and turning around and—and almost wanting to puke. And coming back home and pounding the floor and pounding and—and then generally just getting me a twelve-pack of good Budweiser and sit down and almost cry, you know, and—and you do that time and time again and you—you get disheartened. Just—you—you really get disheartened. And—and also going offshore and—and—and loading up on a—on a load of fish and having to turn around, I mean, getting two thousand pounds of fish and maybe steaming 100 miles, sometimes against inclement weather and—and taking you maybe as much as twenty, eighteen or twenty hours to get off and then immediately finding the fish lots of times and then have to turn right back around and then come in and unload them with a—with a feel for what you could hold. Which you could fill the boat, you know, in just a few hours and then come in and take the whole week off if you wanted to, you know. But no, you got to be kept busy travel—traveling back and forth, bringing these little small amounts, you know, back in.

DT: Can you tell me about why...

(End of Reel 2077)