

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Felix Cox (FC)

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

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REELS: 2078 (2nd of two, preceded by reel 2077)

DT: When we left off, we were talking about some of the regulatory programs that they've dreamed up and I was wondering if you can explain why some of them seem so poorly designed?

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FC: Well that's a—that's a—that's a large question. Why they seem so poorly designed—some of them—some of them may just seem poorly designed and—and they may not be poorly designed but then some of them, I feel, probably are or probably haven't been given the consideration that they should have. Now I—I hope to say one thing, our—our Gulf Council back in 1995 tried to design and implement an individual transferable quota program for our red snapper fishing and congress shot it down, so to speak, in—in a subsequent year in—in the reauthorization of the Magnuson [Fishery Conservation and Management] Act in 1996. So—so—in that instance at least, the—our Council tried to do what—what we feel was right at least to folks of my ilk. We feel that that was the proper thing to—to have done at that time. And again, congress shot it down. Now—now in subsequent years, the Council has had opportunities if—if they would take advantage of them to—to quail this derby fishery but they seem reluctant to and—and there's several trains of thought there. One is and—and I'm going to go out kind of on a conspiratorial limb here and venture a thought that a lot of fisherman have, including myself. For one thing, the Council is weighted heavily toward recreational interests. And in—in that—that fact being a fact and it is a fact, it seems in—in a—understand another fact—that there's always conflicting views and needs between recreational and commercial interests with the recreational interests being comprised of the people that are immediately here on the coast and participating in the recreational fishery. And the commercial people being comprised of commercial fishermen and their clients who would be inlanders or people maybe away from the coast and not directly tied to the fishery. In—in other words, commercial fishermen may catch fish and sell them to people in—in Idaho or—or some land like state like Chicago or—or maybe New York over on the East Coast. So there's a different group of people that have interests in each fishery. And the ones that are—live right here on the coast and are closely tied to the recreational fishery are more astute

generally and have more political clout than the interest of the commercial fishery. So the Council ten—tends to make regulations that favor the Gulf Council at least, tends to make regulations that favor recreational interests. And in so many instances there's a—there's this thing of if one wins, the other loses. It's—it's unfortunate that it can't be

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that we all win at each move but, in so many instances, the Council will make—I'm not sure that this—that it's the—the structure or the way the Council does things that causes this to happen but for—in so many instances, it happens this way that if—if one is given something, it's taken from another, you know. Take it away from him. Take it from Peter to pay Paul, so to speak. And as recreational interests are given preference over commercial interests, of course, it hurts the commercial fishery. And there's a feeling, again, this is not substantiated by anything except Council actions, that—that there's been a move to eventually have recreational interests take this fishery over at the expense, of course, of the commercial fishery. And again, we—we can't—if I had to conduct a lawsuit on it, I'd be at a loss probably but there's that general feeling amongst fishermen, you know. So—so that may be one reason that—that the commercial fishery has been given such ill consideration or adverse consideration, you might say. And the other thing is that the Council is limited in its authority and it shares authority with the National Marine Fishery Service which is a governmental agency, of course, and, of course, all this authority is delegated from congress down to the agency and to the Council. And so there's several different levels of—of politico that—that you have to go through to get one inch of law passed. And, many times, it just doesn't happen, you know, you just get stuck in an old rut that has been politically created and it stays right there and that's what's happened to our commercial fishery I'm afraid. Cause if you try to move out of that rut somebody don't want you to. Somebody's going to get hurt if you move out. If—if you're going move out, you're going to be one up on the dealers, for instance. If you—if the commercial fisherman make one inch of gain, it's at the expense of the dealers of if they make an inch of gain, it may be the—the—at the expense of the recreational interest. And so it's just a battle, like a tug-of-war, back and forth, you

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know. And a mess. It's a mess. It's just an absolute mess. And how you cure it, I don't know. Just—my only idea is that—that—that this thing needs to be, in some way, more privatized and put—inject some free enterprise back into these fisheries and privatize it and allow—allow free enterprise to—to—to take a hold again, to the extent that you can understanding that, again, we can't all participate at the level we used to, you know. Have an overall quota on the fish and then maybe divide that between the two major sectors being the recreational and commercial and then to the extent possible, privatize it and allow buying in and out as you will, you know. And so that's my feeling about it, you know, and—and—and why the Council has had such a problem coming up with this is—is again multifaceted.

DT: What about the competition between wild fishery and fish farming? Do you see much threat from the fish farms?

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FC: Yes, yes there's some threat, there's some threat all right. If—I think if we were all left unsubsidized and unattended and went back to the free enterprise element like I—I mentioned in—you know, and if government didn't have a hand in trying to develop all these things like fish farming, I think wild fish will certainly hold their own in the marketplace. There's no question in my mind about that but unfortunately it seems like every—every avenue that there is to make a dollar, government seems to find some way to—to inject their little paws into it, you know, in the—and unfortunately that's what happened.

DT: Were there some pretty significant subsidies for fish farms?

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FC: My—my understanding is that there have been several incentives created by the government, you know, to—to—to create fish farms and, of course, the government will—will probably say we—we—we need to produce more fish that way. Well that may be true but my thinking is that there's always an expense behind these things like—especially like the artificial production of fish or the manipulated production of fish. And—and—and—and my feeling has always been that—that the wild fishery should be given more attention and by attention, I don't necessarily mean substance—subsidizing it but I do mean culturing it and developing it some way and—and more incentives for people to conserve it and—and take care of it and—and use it maybe like the way I used to before I was shot out of business here. And—and use some of the practices that I—that I used to use and—in the old days, you know, like—like leaving plenty of fish on the place and—and not harvesting them right down to the bare bones, you know. And using practices such as that, you know, encouraging—encouraging practices such as that. And

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by privatizing fisheries, I think you can do that. I think you can give the incentives and the encouragement to—to—for fisherman to—to use practices like this. And removing these ridiculous size limits in offshore fisheries that we have that just encourage waste and, in fact, mandate waste. Make it mandatory that you waste the fish. Now that's—it's foolish, absolutely foolish, you know. When we—when we finally get away from these moves like that, I think we'll make some big strides, you know, I believe.

DW: Have you had in that type of conservation practice either alliances or antagonisms with environmental groups?

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FC: We've had—yes, we have. We've had on both sides of the fence. We've had encounters on both sides of the fence there. As a matter of fact, I—I have been approached by a group called the Environmental Defense Fund, used to be the Environmental Defense Fund — it's the Environmental Defense now, and they and I share some core beliefs about these very

issues that we were talking about, especially about the conservation. They—they are, of course, as interested in conservation as I am or at least they appear to be. And—and then there have been some adversaries and Greenpeace being mentioned, I'm not sure what this group would have against conservation and I don't think they have anything against conservation to be honest with you but, seems like the approach is that they—they take—seem to be contrary sometimes to true conservation. And—and true—to the understanding that—that fishermen must be allowed to make a profit along with this conservation that is demanded. We all—we all want to conserve, understanding that if we don't it will eventually go by the wayside. But, in the process, there's ways of conserving and still allowing a pocket to be made too. And that's what I, of course, am interested in and—and some environmental groups are interested in that and—and I would encourage more of them to become interested in that. Real—to realize that fishermen, commercial fishermen, in particular, operate on a profit just like they do when they get their paycheck. You know, we have to have a paycheck. Otherwise, we're out the window. And so when—when we come to terms with that issue and when an environmental group understands that yes, practice conservation but don't make it be at a—at the expense of someone's livelihood, figure some way, somehow to—to consider the person's livelihood that you may be extinguishing. And—and the—and—and folks that I've dealt with with the Environmental Defense have indicated to me on several occasions that they—they appreciate this approach to conservation and they—and—and I feel like they do so we've stir—struck up a little alliance there and, as a matter of fact, we're currently working on—on trying to get the moratorium on individual fishing quotas lifted. And the congress is considering this right now and...

DW: Have you got a particular local legislator, congressperson, state senator who, over time, has been involved with your Council of fishermen or has been coming to your defense or has voiced your concerns?

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FC: Unfortunately, no. Unfortunately we don't have—we don't have a strong voice in congress for our Gulf of Mexico concerns. Now other fishing regions do have, like in the Northwest, you know, they have strong fishing ties to their congressional people like in Alaska and—and the State of Washington but now—now Louisiana has a relatively strong—their fishing industry has a relatively strong tie to Senator [John] Breaux and, as a matter of fact, I attended a—a field hearing just recently on the—on the reauthorization of the Magnuson Act that will—that will occur here this year and Senator Breaux and Senator Olympia Snow were conducting these hearings and gave a little testimony to them and—and several fishermen gave testimony to them and—and it was specific—specifically in regards to the individual transferable quota programs that we might eventually enjoy. And that was ninety percent of the debate at this particular hearing. So it's—it's a thing, as I've indicated to you, I feel like it is the tool of the future for managing fisheries. Privatization through individual quotas and when you speak privatization, lots of people cringe at that thought, you know, because they for—forever been capable of going out there and catching

the fish any time they want to and it's—so it's new and it's contentious. And it's something to be dealt with though, I feel like, because I think it's on the horizon. I certainly hope it is.

DT: Does it surprise you that you've become politically active?

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FC: Yes, it does because it really is not my nature and to be quite candid, I don't feel real comfortable in the political arena because I—I have some core reservations against participation in—in politics. I—I—it might have evolved from my childhood, I'm not sure, but I just have that core feeling that all politicians are crooked and I—I shouldn't feel that way, you know. But I—I hope no politician sees this film. And I know I shouldn't have that feeling because I—I know that's not the case. I know that there are good ones but I just—unfortunately, I—I haven't had many encounters with good, conscientious, political people, you know. My loss I guess. But...

DT: Looking down the long road, what do you think the future is for commercial fishing?

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FC: Well—let me—let me first say it—it does not look good right now. What's on the horizon does not look good. But I think I—I may be overly optimistic but I really and truly believe that there will come a time, maybe several years, the—when the public, in general, rises up and realizes that they need good, conscientious, commercial fishermen just like we need good movie producers and—and just like we—we need all different professional people, you know, that we utilize. I—I strongly believe in commercial fishing because I've been it all my life and I know that there's a need for it because I know that—that people want to eat fish and I know that they need them. They need fish. And somebody is going to furnish it to them some way. And if it's not the traditional way, it'll be some other way and I feel like the traditional, old, wild caught fish is some of the best protein that a person can—can encounter. And—and—and I know I—I always say this, my private feeling is that when I'm sixty-five years old and hopefully retired and getting social security and probably nothing else, I would still like to be able to go down to the fish market or a restaurant and buy a fish. And if commercial fishing is extinguished, I won't be able to do that and I think that will be a great loss to the whole nation. So I have some optimism. I—I feel like there's—there's somewhere in the future, there's—there—there's a turnaround for commercial fishing.

DT: You mentioned that your son had fished with you at one point. Would you recommend him becoming a fisherman or if he's not?

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FC: Not at this time. When it gets good, at this point in the future that I'm envisioning, yes, I—I would think that—that—that would be a good time. Although I realize that you can't jump right in when it's good and then jump out when it gets bad but with—it—with the immediate future looks no better than it has for the last ten or twenty years. And that's not

been very good. So—and any—almost anybody that you encounter in the fishing community will immediately reject the thought of their sons or daughters being in commercial fishing, almost everyone. There are a few old die-hards that still, the young-uns coming along may participate. But by—by golly, they're few and far between so my children, at this point, I—no, I wouldn't recommend it.

DT: What sort of place in the outdoors do you like to go to and would you tell us a little about that place?

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FC: Well I'm—I guess I'm probably different than—than—maybe not different than other commercial fisherman but I probably different than the mainstream society. They—I've fished all my life. I've fished for forty, fifty years and I've caught enough fish to satisfy every need that I could have, as far as desire to catch a fish. I've caught every kind of fish that I could practically think of. And to be honest with you, I have no further desire to—to—to live around the coast and be on a boat and go offshore and go fishing. I'd rather be on the mountain somewhere myself. That's just my private opinion. I'd like to spend a little time on land and doing some things that are not directly...

(plane flying over)

DW: Is there a particular place you might go to, in Texas?

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FC: Not really. No, no particular place. I guess the most rejuvenating place that I find is probably out there in the brush along about my home, out about four or five miles from here. I—I enjoy getting out in the woods out there and just walking around and—and no particular place out further than that. I guess I'm an old homebody but I don't need to be right directly on the water though, you know.

DT: Maybe you can mention some of your childhood times in the Carolinas?

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FC: Oh well now that—yes that was a—in my opinion, was a beautiful place to grow up, especially as a young boy. Where I was born and reared was—was at—on the remnants of an old southern plantation where the roadway that went down all the way to the water was lined with big oak trees and—and out in what I—I assume used to be the cotton fields, that or the—or the pine groves or whatever, has now got a lot of hickory and—and pine and stuff on it and—and a lot of game. Now this was the case when I was a young-un. Now it's completely different than—it's—it's horrible now. I—it's wall-to-wall golf courses and condos now but—but my old home place, when I was a child, was one of the most beautiful places in—in my memory to—to—for a young boy to grow—the opportunity was endless. Opportunity for a young boy was endless. To just go up the river and fish and—and you could say you fished and—and you could go out in the woods and kill a squirrel or—or—or

a rabbit or anything and the whole woods belonged to me. Or at least I thought it did. I used it as mine but—and you could cut a Christmas tree, you know, and you could cut a cedar tree and use it for Christmas. And the last time I did that, my mother cautioned against that strongly because the last time I tried when I was about thirty years old and went to visit her then, said you may be cropping some neighbor's tree son. So times have changed, no question. And—and the great place that it was in my childhood is no more and but I still have some good memories of it and—and...

DT: Well thank you for sharing some of your memories and...

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FC: You're more than welcome.

DT: ...good luck in the future.

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FC: You're more than welcome.

DT: I appreciate it.

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FC: I enjoyed doing it. Any—any time I can speak up for fishing, call me.

(misc.)

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