

PHILANTHROPY MATTERS

Commercial Fishing Crucial to Keys Economy

As the Ocean Reef Community Foundation works to assess needs and provide solutions through our Florida Keys Hurricane Response efforts, we're sharing our Philanthropy Matters space with a series of guest columnists to bring the Hurricane Irma experience beyond Ocean Reef's gates home for our readers. Members are very familiar with the fruits of labor of this week's writer Captain Bill Kelly and the Florida Keys Commercial Fishermen's Association he represents.



by Capt. Bill Kelly, Executive Director Florida Keys Commercial Fishermen's Association

According to ORC Senior Director of Culinary Operations Chef Philippe Reynaud, "Our Members are very fond of locally caught seafood. In our restaurants they prefer it to any other choices ... they know it is super fresh, delicious and perfectly cooked." In fact, last year the Club's Director of Purchasing Dan Taylor bought more than 5,500 pounds of local stone crabs and more than 25,000 pounds of local fish. The FKCFCA has partnered in innovative endeavors to ensure just as much is available this year.

Next to tourism, commercial fishing is the second largest economic engine in Monroe County and the second largest employer. The big three – lobster, stone crab and finfish – generate more than \$150 million in sales for fishermen annually. When you look at how many times that money changes hands in the community through dockage, diesel repair, fuel, maintenance, grocery stores, schools, churches and more, it has an in-county turnover rate of six times that in "new" money pumped into the economy. That puts the total value to the Florida Keys at a whopping \$900 million a year. Commercial fishing operations directly employ more than 4,500 people, not counting fish



Lobster Harvest, Ernie Piton, FV Risky Business

houses or other related businesses.

In the wake of Hurricane Irma, commercial fishermen in the Florida Keys have mobilized their efforts at recovering and redeploying displaced fishing gear as quickly as possible. Approximately 465,000 spiny lobster traps are deployed annually in and around Florida's waters. Of those, about 350,000 are fished in South Florida and the Keys and initial estimates indicated about 43 percent or 150,500 of those traps were moved considerable distances in both Florida Bay and the Florida Straits due to storm surge and winds reaching up to 130 mph.

Post Storm Action

The dynamic forces of tropical storms and hurricanes leave very discernible swaths of damage on the water just as on land. The goal for commercial fishermen became four-fold: 1) rapid damage assessment 2) recovery of displaced gear 3) redeployment and 4) reclamation of lost gear. Joining forces with the Florida Sea Grant Program administered by the University of Florida, the Florida Keys Commercial Fishermen's Association provided two experienced pilots and aircraft to conduct fly-overs of the entire National Marine Sanctuary including Biscayne and Everglades National Parks. Using Global Positioning System (GPS) enabled cameras supplied by Sea Grant, the two aircraft covered nearly 3,000 square miles of water in three days of flights capturing over 15,000 photos of lobster gear distribution. This information was uploaded to computers, plotted to nautical charts and then provided to fishermen and law enforce-

ment to aid in the recovery and redeployment of displaced gear. Countless man-hours of operation were saved as well as thousands of gallons of marine fuel.

This rapid assessment and plotting of trap locations aided the recovery and redeployment of roughly 17,500 lobster traps in just the first week following the storm. Recovery efforts continue and it is now estimated over 50,000 traps have been recovered, redeployed and are once again

harvesting spiny lobster. Our cleanup efforts continue both on the water and along shorelines the length of the island chain.

With stone crab season well underway fishermen continue to recover lobster gear as they work their stone crab traps while hoping for a bountiful season to cover losses sustained on uninsured lobster gear. Fortunately, the resources are resilient and evidence of post storm recovery is clearly evident in two very sustainable fisheries practiced for well over a decade in the Florida Keys.

Our partnerships with Florida Sea Grant, FWC Law Enforcement, the Marine Resources Department of Monroe County and local residents have been invaluable in this recovery effort. Thank you all!

To make a tax-deductible donation to the ORCF Florida Keys Hurricane Response Fund, please mail your check made payable to the Ocean Reef Community Foundation with Florida Keys Hurricane Response in the memo line to: 35 Ocean Reef Drive, Suite 148, Key Largo, FL 33037. We are also now accepting online donations by credit card at www.orfound.org.

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