

The Fate of Working Waterfronts after Hurricane Katrina: the Mississippi and Alabama Experience

Jody A. Thompson, Extension Environmental Assistant
Auburn University Marine Extension and Research Center/Alabama Sea Grant Extension
Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant

Abstract

The destruction of Hurricane Katrina heightened development pressures in coastal Mississippi and Alabama. This presentation will discuss efforts of Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant to work with water-dependent businesses and other stakeholders to preserve working waterfronts and maintain the traditional local culture.

Objectives

This presentation will share case studies of activities related to preservation of working waterfronts along the Mississippi and Alabama Gulf coasts.

Background

A fragile area in coastal Mississippi and Alabama, the working waterfront provides a boon the economies of each state. Both states profit from a mix of commercial fishing and processing (shrimp, crab, oyster) and charter fishing enterprises, as well as water-related tourism activities, including highly-profitable birding.

Expenditures related to Mobile Bay, Alabama alone, including fishing, and non-consumptive (eco-tourism) activities, have been estimated at \$3 billion per year (University of South Alabama).

Traditionally, fishing villages, like Bayou La Batre, Alabama, have dotted the coastlines of both states, with generations of families operating fishing vessels, processing facilities, boatyards, and support industries. But locations along the waterfront are in increasingly high demand for development. In Alabama, all of these facilities are privately owned.

Unlike Alabama, Mississippi holds some public dock space, primarily in Biloxi. However, dock space is extremely limited, and many boats seek refuge at docks in Alabama and Louisiana.

Under original Mississippi gaming regulations, casino gaming was limited to take place on the water, limiting casino development in coastal Mississippi to the waterfront, thus impacting dock space and public access. The introduction of casino gaming to Mississippi made positive impacts on Mississippi economies, and offered alternative employment to many traditional fishing industry workers.

After Hurricane Frederic in 1979, development of the beach tourism industry took place heavily along the eastern Alabama Gulf Coast. Development of resorts and condominiums still continues. In response to this tourism, the charter fishing industry has flourished in this area. Charter fishing, as well as traditional commercial seafood fishing activities, continues along the western portion of Alabama's coastline.

Economic Impacts

Bayou La Batre, Alabama, the “Seafood Capitol of Alabama”, is one of the most productive ports in the United States. Seafood products landed in Bayou La Batre have a dockside value that averages more than \$30 million annually. It is estimated that commercial seafood landing in Bayou La Batre has an economic impact on the state that approaches \$100 million annually. Additionally, there are 8 shipyards with annual revenue of \$100 million annually. The industry has relied on participation from large Vietnamese and Laotian communities (51.7% white, 23% Vietnamese, 9.5% other Asian, approx. 1500 residents total).

Hurricane Katrina

Just prior to Hurricane Katrina, a large resort development was proposed for the town of Dauphin Island, prompting concerns about future development of the area, public access, and the future of commercial fishing in coastal Alabama. Hurricane Katrina devastated the Alabama coastline in addition to Mississippi. Homes were destroyed, casinos beached, and fishing vessels tossed into the marsh. According to estimates by the University of South Alabama, damages in Bayou La Batre alone totaled roughly \$112.25 million:

- Boat losses \$2.5 million
- Vessel removal \$3.8 million
- Lost inventory \$20.5 million
- Wages & invoices unpaid \$5.8 million
- Lost revenues \$57.4 million

After recovery in Mississippi and Alabama began, development pressures began to rise beyond that prior to the hurricane. The Mississippi legislature passed amended gaming regulations allowing casino gambling to take place on land. Resorts and condominiums were discussed in many areas. The leadership in many towns began to discuss with their residents, future development plans.

Working Waterfront Coordination Efforts

Water-dependent businesses share growing concerns about future waterfront access and their ability to conduct business in an effective and profitable way. In October 2006, the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium held workshops in Mississippi and Alabama to discuss pressures on waterfront property owners and dock space. MASGC enlisted the help of Maine Sea Grant and Waterfronts Florida Partnership Program to share the idea of a working waterfront and success stories from their states. Business, industry, political leaders, and fishing representatives attended in both states, and the seeds were planted for further discussion and activity.

Moving to Protect the Industry

In Mississippi, the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality has taken the role of coordination and facilitation. All representatives agree that the action to pursue in this state would be to acquire an inshore facility, a former military operation, as a seafood processing park,

where product would be shipped by land. There will continue to be publicly owned docks, with hopes to expand the number of slips.

Through the facilitation of MASGC in Alabama, a group of fishing, shipbuilding, and affiliated business representatives have formed the Alabama Working Waterfronts Coalition. The group also includes members from academia, the towns of Orange Beach, Dauphin Island, and Bayou La Batre, chambers of commerce, and charter fishing interests. One goal of the AWWC is to draft state legislation using the state of Maine as a model, to present to legislators in an upcoming session.

Success Stories

In order to protect dock space for its charter fishing fleet, the Town of Orange Beach, Alabama purchased a marina, and is interested in purchasing or building a second marina. Slips are rented to charter fishing vessels, ensuring that dock space will be available regardless of future waterfront development.

Both MASGC and the AWWC have produced informational sheets for distribution to educate the public and legislators about the concept of working waterfronts. AWWC has distributed a letter of support throughout the community to gain interest and support for their actions, and MASGC is developing an educational website.

The Alabama Working Waterfronts Association in partnership with the MASGC issued a request for proposals in December 2006 for a Working Waterfronts Inventory for western coastal Alabama. The project was initiated in April 2007, with an anticipated completion date of December 2007. The study will produce a baseline GIS map and description of the current working waterfront.

Conclusion

It is recognized by all that development pressures along the Gulf Coast will continue. The Working Waterfronts groups in Mississippi and Alabama are taking actions not only to preserve their income and maintain an important economic influence, but to preserve community character and a traditional way of life. These groups have found success by learning from the successes of other states. The successful activities will continue to work to protect the working waterfront.