

High prices, low numbers may sum up shrimp season

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Shrimp crew members talk from separate shrimp boats Wednesday at the Brownsville Shrimp Basin. The National Marine Fisheries Service is forecasting a 53.2 million-pound shrimp catch in the Western Gulf for the 2014-15 season

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BY STEVE CLARK Staff Writer

As shrimpers prepare for the reopening of the Gulf Coast shrimp season on July 15, projections are that the shrimp catch will be down this season compared to the historical average.

The National Marine Fisheries Service is forecasting a 53.2 million-pound shrimp catch in the Western Gulf for the 2014-15 season. The historical average, from 1960 to 2012, is 56.5 million pounds, according to NMFS.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department closes state waters to shrimping to nine nautical miles offshore for roughly two months each year for conservation purposes, a decades-old practice that helps ensure more and larger shrimp and better prices for the industry.

The NMFS typically follows suit, closing federal waters to 200 nautical miles off the coast for the same reason. The shrimp season was closed May 15 this year.

“We’re ready to go fishing, I just don’t think we’re going out expecting to catch a ton of shrimp this year,” said Andrea Hance, executive director of the Texas Shrimp Association. “Everybody’s excited to go fishing. They’re just not sure what they’re going to catch out there.”

Shrimp prices remain very high on the other hand, which Hance says is good and bad.

Shrimpers generally welcome higher prices for their product, but past a certain point high prices cut into demand, she said.

Winter cold fronts in Texas and Louisiana the last two years are partly to blame for reduced shrimp populations in the Western Gulf, since cold weather slows shrimp maturation. That’s according to Lance Robinson, upper coast regional director for TPWD’s Coastal Fisheries Division, who noted that Louisiana opened its shrimp season later than ever this year. “Everything’s a little late,” he said. “They haven’t grown quite as fast. It’s certainly not a bumper crop.”

Shrimp spawn in the Gulf. The larvae migrate into bayous and estuaries to mature, then swim back out to the Gulf to spawn again. Closing the season allows the creatures to grow bigger and reduces waste caused by boats discarding undersized shrimp caught in the nets, according to TPWD.

The shrimping industry is on board with the closures because it helps them economically, while NMFS began mirroring the practice because it too recognized the biological and economic benefits, Robinson said. TPWD is required to consider both economics and biology in managing the state’s natural resources, he noted. Still, there’s not much the state or the feds can do if Mother Nature refuses to cooperate — such as by sending down too much cold weather. While this season’s scarcity is

likely to drive prices even higher, Hance said she would actually prefer that they come down a bit. Much higher and it's going to be tough to move wild-caught shrimp — already at a premium compared to imported.

“We don't want the prices to go up any higher,” she said. “It hurts everybody.”

Prices have been climbing steeply the last few years. In May, jumbo shrimp had reached an average of \$10.65 off the boat, according to NMFS data for the Western Gulf. Hance certainly doesn't want to see prices plummet, though she would like to see them stabilize at a dollar or two less than they are now, “to keep everybody happy,” she said. “I think they're too high to sustain at that price,” Hance said. “People are still buying the shrimp at that price and that's good, but a lot of the restaurants have taken wild-caught shrimp off the menu and switched it out with imported shrimp.”

The reason Gulf shrimp prices were rising even before the recent cold weather was due to a worldwide shortage of shrimp, itself partly the result of a disease, early mortality syndrome, that was delivering a serious blow to Asian and Mexican shrimp ponds. However, Hance said EIS appears to be less of a factor than originally thought. A bigger factor driving prices upward seems to be increased demand for Gulf wild-caught shrimp. The Gulf shrimping industry — beset for years by rising fuel costs, government regulation and cheap imports — has long struggled to implant a preference for wild-caught shrimp among consumers.

If indeed the marketing campaign has succeeded, now the issue is making sure restaurants are honest about where their shrimp comes from, Hance said. Based on her personal experience, she said, most of the time they're not. Hance said she's working with the Texas Department of Agriculture “Go Texan” program to find a way to recognize restaurants that serve Gulf shrimp and also let customers know who's selling what, through conspicuous advertising.

Gulf shrimp comprises about 10 percent of the shrimp consumed in the United States, and that's about all the Gulf shrimp industry, at its current numbers, has the capacity to catch, Hance said.

“Now that we've made people aware, we've got to the point where people are asking for wild-caught shrimp,” she said. “The problem is the restaurant is not telling the truth.”