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Oregon's once-tiny shrimp fishery has grown into a multimillion-dollar business

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on May 08, 2013 at 7:04 PM, updated May 09, 2013 at 6:13 AM



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Bruce Ely, The Oregonian

NEWPORT, OREGON - May 7, 2013 - Joe Rock was one of the pioneers of the Oregon shrimping fishery. He's now retired from fishing but is still active in other aspects of what has become the state's second-largest fishery. He says the fishery didn't catch on in Oregon until the 1960s, but has grown rapidly over the last few decades. Bruce Ely/The Oregonian

Oregon's shrimp fishery has grown into a multi-million dollar business gallery (3 photos)

NEWPORT – If you are looking for something to celebrate, try this. Friday is National Shrimp Day.

Why should you care?

For one thing, it's the No. 2 fishery in Oregon, second only to our state crustacean, the **Dungeness Crab**. For another, shrimp is the most popular seafood in the country, a rating it's held, according to **NOAA** every year since 2003.

Perhaps, even more importantly, the Oregon pink shrimp fishery was the first fishery in Oregon certified as sustainable by the **Marine Stewardship Council** and the first shrimp fishery anywhere dubbed sustainable.

So yes, there's plenty of reason to celebrate the shellfish and plenty of it to celebrate, even if it's reputation is, well, a bit shrimpy.

"Most people don't even know we have a shrimp fishery off of Oregon," said Brad Pettinger, director of the **Oregon Trawl Commission**. "Oregon is the center of the grounds. We count for 75 percent of the landings on the west coast."

Last year's catch of 49.1 million pounds – worth about \$24 million – was second only to the record high of 56 million pounds in 1978.

"That's one-fifth of Oregon's total commercial fishery value for 2012," said Pettinger. "It is a major employment factor for five Oregon fish plants seven months of the year that normally run two 10-hour shifts.

"Outside of the 64 boats and processing plants, support businesses such as fuel docks, gear and grocery stores, net shops, packaging companies, trucking and distribution to both regional and international markets all contribute to the fishery as an economic driver."

And yet, until the 1960s the fishery didn't even exist. Joe Rock, a recently retired fisherman of 54 years, recalls the early days.

A couple of fishermen tried to fish for shrimp in the 1950s, Rock said. "They were catching the product, but the markets weren't there."

About a decade later, another fisherman ordered a net from a maker in the Gulf of Mexico through shop in Astoria. Cost him \$350, Rock recalled.

"He came into Newport and had a bag of shrimp on the deck. He probably had 2,500 to 3,000 pounds. It was a big surprise. We were all amazed. About six or seven boats started fishing for shrimp after that."

The fishermen sold the shrimp to fish plants, where 30 to 35 women handpicked the meat.

"I had one woman that could pick nine pounds of meat an hour," Rock said. "They peeled them by hand. When you get them cooked just right, you squeeze them, the head pops off and the tail pops off."

Not long after the fishery caught on, a few of the fishermen went to the gulf and brought back trawlers built there.

"They used two nets," said Rock. "We laughed at them at first. But we could see it really worked. They didn't have as much bycatch. So the fishery went into a double rig system, with net and big booms off each side."

That was the start of the fishery's serious effort toward sustainability – in short, harvesting in such a way that allows the species to maintain healthy numbers, while doing as little harm as possible to the marine environment and other species.

More recently, the fishery has moved to using nets that release young smaller shrimp and other bycatch, capturing only the older, larger shrimp. They also work just above the bottom to avoid catching the skates and other fish, Rock said.

The Marine Stewardship Council recognized the fishery's efforts in 2007 and recertified it in February 2013.

Last year's catch pens out to about 750,000 to 800,000 pounds per boat, Pettinger said, and this year could be just as bountiful.

"It is crazy how much shrimp is in the water now, Pettinger said. "The shrimping right now is as good as it's ever been. These are the good old days for the shrimp fishery."

-- Lori Tobias

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