

Bringing in the squid

Bountiful harvest bodes well for packers

By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Under the lights and curses of fishermen, millions of pounds of squid were pulled from the Monterey Bay this summer, feeding a thriving squid packing business in Watsonville.

The squid industry, rebounding from lean years in the mid-1980s, now employs several hundred part-time workers in the Watsonville area, many of whom were laid off by vegetable canneries earlier this year.

"We've had real steady growth and about tripled our capacity in the past few years," said David Hartzell, a co-owner of Squid Machine Inc. in Watsonville. "The market has been pretty good."

Squid Machine is one of three major squid packers in the area.

This year about 5,000 tons of the slippery cephalopod, or about 10 million pounds, were harvested from the Monterey Bay area. Hartzell said it usually takes nine squid to weigh a pound, which means around 100 million squid were taken in the Monterey area.

The number of squid in the bay is truly staggering. According to Bob Leos, a state Department of Fish and Game biologist, the squid start appearing in the Monterey Bay area in April, arriving in schools as large as a half-mile long, and inhabit the area through the summer.

Fishermen locate the squid with electronic fish finders and then anchor in the area, attracting the squid with bright halogen lights. When enough squid appear, the fishermen surround them with seine nets and haul them aboard. A fleet of mostly Italian fishermen has been harvesting squid in the bay for more than 50 years.

Fights, threats and occasional boat rammings were not uncommon during the season as fishermen battled each other for their "turf."

"More and more boats are going for squid," said David Awamleh, sales manager for Del Mar Seafoods. "But only the big guys are surviving. It gets pretty ugly. Boats are rammed when people get close. You know the Italian temper."

Once the squid are caught,



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

This year's 10-million pound harvest of squid has kept workers busy at Squid Machine Inc.

they are taken to a dock, where they are sucked out of the holds by fish pumps — huge vacuums.

"In the water they are almost transparent," said Awamleh, a former squid fisherman. "When their blood runs through it looks like their skin is moving. They're a reddish-purple color when they freeze."

Packers such as Del Mar Seafoods, which specialize in whole squid, bleach the squid white by soaking them in water, clean them and freeze them. Much of

the product is exported to Europe and Japan.

The local companies also pack squid caught in Southern California.

Hartzell said the market is strong enough that his company is considering building a second plant, but it may be in Mexico, which is somewhat ironic as some of his workers were victims of layoffs by Green Giant, which also moved to Mexico.

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Squid

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The squid fishery in the bay is unstable. During the past 12 years it has gone from peaks of 14,000 tons of squid harvested in 1979 to less than 450 tons harvested in 1984.

Leos said the squid fishery was devastated by the El Nino years in the early 1980s when the water temperature warmed.

This year was also an unusual year. Squid catches were extremely small until August and September. Historically, most squid have been caught off Monterey, but Leos said the heaviest catches this year were from Santa Cruz to Half Moon Bay.

"It was a highly unusual year," Leos said.

Not a lot is known about the creature. Leos said the squid live one or two years, and then, much like salmon, go into a spawning phase and die.

Before dying, the female squid

leaves behind a series of small egg packets, the size of fingernails, attached to the ocean floor. Leos said the squid place their egg packets together until they build masses, "the size of a room," as large as 30 feet in diameter and 5 feet thick.

"They are massive, strange-looking white clusters all over the place," Leos said. "You'll see clusters spread out over miles of the ocean bottom. I can't imagine how many eggs are out there. That's why there are so many squid."

Few studies have been done to determine if fishing is seriously affecting the squid population and what impact that might have on other sea life. Squid are one of the foundations of the ocean food chain and are eaten by everything from rock fish to whales.

"We sure would like to know more about them," he said.

For now, however, the business is good.