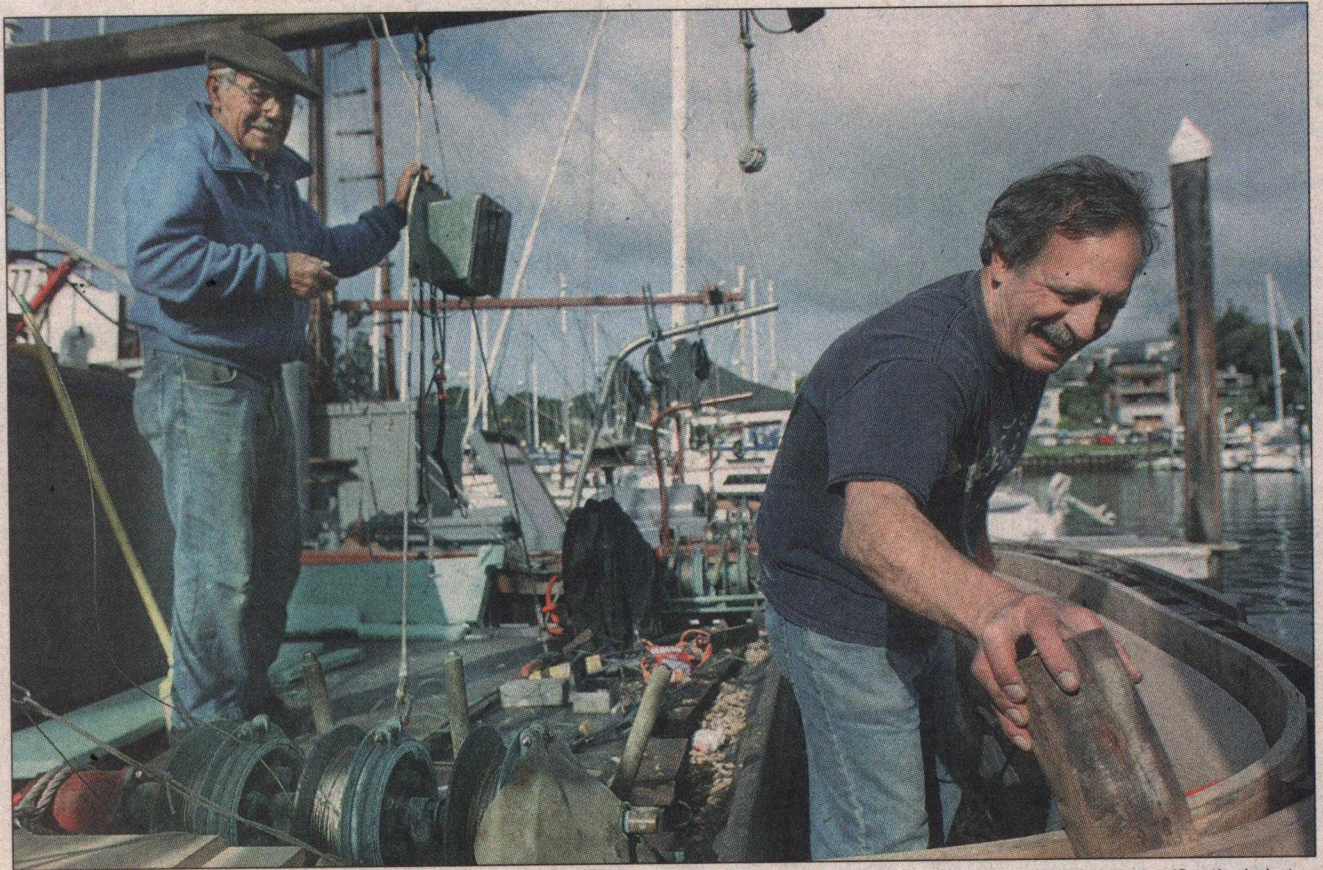


LIFE AT SEA: AWASH IN ECONOMIC PERIL

A hardy lot prepares to shove off at the start of salmon season



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Wayne Bassano, right, helps his father, John Bassano, prepare the Lou Denny Wayne for salmon season, which begins today. The slumping price of their catch, and the uncertainty of their business, is a cause of concern for the Bassanos.

Fish & Fishing

By **BRIAN SEALS**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ

Santa Cruz harbor was buzzing with activity this weekend as fishermen prepped their boats for today's kickoff of the commercial salmon season.

But the buzz has been fading in recent years. While upward of 80 commercial boats worked out of the harbor just 15 years ago, there are now about 60, with only 30 or so fishing regularly.

The anglers tend to be older, too, with many in their 50s and 60s. Gone are the days when a son would automatically follow his father into the business.

The end of an era?

"I hope not, but (the business) gets tougher and tougher every year," said Santa Cruz fisherman Mike Stiller, taking a break last week from his chores aboard The Janet E.

Uncertain future

Fishermen face uncertain prospects every year — from El Niño weather patterns that send fish elsewhere to simply finding where the salmon are schooling.

But as the season opens today from the Santa Cruz area to Mexico —



Visiting fishing boats began arriving Friday for today's opening of the commercial salmon season.

with salmon likely to start arriving in local fish markets Wednesday afternoon — anglers say the fishery faces unprecedented hardships. There are escalating fuel costs and falling wholesale prices, as well as tighter regulations on when and where fish can be caught.

In the late 1980s, fishermen were earning up to \$3 a pound for their

catch. But while the cost of doing business has gone up, wholesale salmon prices have dropped.

In September, anglers were getting an average of \$1.96 per pound. Fishermen, who as a group negotiate for a wholesale price, are hoping for that price again, but talk at the harbor Monday afternoon was gloomy.

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Many fishermen said they were hearing of prices dipping below \$1 a pound.

"It always seems to fluctuate until the last minute," said a concerned Wayne Bassano of Santa Cruz, who fishes with his 89-year-old father John.

Also problematic is a lack of younger people getting into the business.

It used to be a boat owner would hire a deckhand, who would work a season or two before striking out on his own. Now many anglers go it alone.

"You just don't get the younger people taking over as the older guys retire," said Santa Cruz's Tom Canale, 54, who has been fishing for more than 20 years.

At age 39, Tom Faulk is one of the younger commercial fisherman in the harbor. He said he does it because he loves life at sea.

"It's just the freedom of getting out there,"

he said. "You get to see things other people don't. There's just nothing else I'd rather do."

But he has tried.

In 1979, still in his teens, Faulk was crewing on a fishing boat that was struck by a tanker. He spent 21 hours in a raft before being rescued. After that, he tried his hand in electronics.

Six years later, though, the sea called him back. He's been fishing ever since, and now captains The Palamino.

But even Faulk admits that the draw of the ocean is not enough for everyone. He fishes year-round, chasing salmon and crab. Without similar dedication, it's hard for someone to make a living in the business, he said.

Statewide there is a steady decline in the number of commercial salmon fishermen.

In 2000, 725 boats reported salmon catches, and 356 of those boats caught 90 percent of the fish, said Alan Grover of the state Department of Fish and Game. In 1990, 2,115 boats reported catching salmon, with 976 of those catching 90 percent of the fish.

Not dead yet

But despite the hardships, fishermen are quick to say the salmon business here is still viable.

Over the past week, the local anglers have been joined by roughly 60 boats from the state's northern stretches, where the season has yet to open.

During the summer, many local fishermen sell their catches directly from their boats, allowing them to get more for their salmon than they would from wholesalers.

Fishermen also are optimistic about the upcoming season. Fishermen statewide caught 4.5 million salmon last year, compared with 3.8 million in 1999.

"It should be pretty close to what it was last year," predicted David Goldenberg of the California Salmon Council.

And fishermen tend to be a hardy lot. Those who have been in the business a while say a person can still make a living fishing if they are willing to make the effort.

That involves motoring out of the harbor

at 4 or 5 each morning, and spending the day on the water. The salmon are hooked individually. There are no nets.

Most boats, which average 30 to 40 feet long, fish within 15 to 20 miles of shore. Some captains make day trips, while others go out for a few days at a time.

"If I catch about 30 fish (a day), I'm happy," Canale said.

At an average of 10 pounds each, at \$2 per pound, that's a \$600 day.

The hope is to make as much money as possible in a short amount of time. As the water begins to warm, the fish go deeper in search of food, which makes them harder to find.

Sea lions also make the fishing more difficult, Stiller said. Many fishermen simply abandon areas, knowing sea lions will rob their catch if they don't.

"You never know if there's going to be any future, but a guy can go out and make it if he really goes for it," Canale said.

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