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AUG 15 2008

PFMS
Dr. DONALD MCISAAC

Hope you don't mind
me passing my problems
on to you for review.

I have tried to co-operate
all these years, but
it looks like my
shell rockfish days are
finally finished.

Joanna Thibel says
no R.C.A. changes are
expected until 2012.

I doubt I'll be around
for the next change.

Allocations mean little
if all fishing must
occur where those
fish do not live.

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Last Bodega hook-and-line fisherman may see the end

by **Jacoba Charles**

The last hook-and-line fisherman making his living on the deep seas near Bodega Bay hauled his boat out of the water yesterday after learning that his prime fishing grounds are within a protected area.

Josh Churchman of Bolinas may face a fine or have his permit revoked because of inadvertently fishing in a rockfish, or red snapper, conservation area whose boundary had been changed.

"I'm not giving up yet, but it really is a hassle," said Churchman. "I'm getting tired of fighting."

The local rock cod fishing industry has been essentially eliminated by a combination of decreasing allowed catch, increasing regulatory hurdles and expanded rockfish conservation areas (RCAs).

At the beginning of this year there were still five active hook-and-line fishermen between Bolinas and Bodega Bay; Churchman is now the last and worries that he too may give up the industry soon.

In 2006, fishermen landed 6,460 pounds of chilipepper rockfish, which are one of the most abundant and popular rockfish species to fish in Bodega Bay. In 2000, over 80,000 pounds of the fish were landed at the same port.

"At this point, it's a hobby, not a profession. We can only go out two days per month," Churchman said.

Fishing rock cod provides roughly a quarter of his annual income whereas it used to account for well over half. He also fishes for crab and salmon, but worries that he won't be able to make ends meet—especially this year, with the salmon season closed.

"The fishery management council favors higher impact trawl fisheries," said Paul Johnson of the Monterey Fish Market, who buys Churchman's catch. "Oftentimes you'll go to San Francisco and there are three trawlers working but no hook-and-line fishermen. In Bodega Bay there used to be ten hook-and-line guys; now there's one."

There are two separate rock cod fisheries available to local fishermen: the state-regulated nearshore fishery and the federally regulated limited entry fishery in deeper water. A labyrinth of regulations surrounds each.

"It's become so complicated to fish—these things are tough to keep up with," said Tom Moore, a biologist with the Department of Fish and Game who is based in Bodega Bay. "It's getting to be too much; but a lot of these complicated regulations the only way that you can allow some fishing given the current management schemes."

For example, Churchman has two boats: a small one in Bolinas that fishes in nearshore waters, and a larger one in Bodega Bay that fishes in deeper waters.

From Bolinas, he could take the small boat out to the Farrallone Islands, where

he is allowed to catch 700 pounds of fish per trip, six times a year.

However, in order to legally travel home across federal waters carrying his catch, he would have to install an expensive Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) that the port at Bolinas is not equipped to support. So the Farrallones are out, Churchman said.

The only other fishing area near Bolinas is Duxbury, where he refuses to go because it has been over harvested and fish there are depleted.

"The VMS requirements have removed all of West Marin's rockfish fishermen in six months," Churchman said. "It's an incredibly effective tool."

Churchman's larger boat, which also has to have a cumbersome VMS, used to bring home 80,000 pounds of rock cod each year.

"It's a drop in the bucket compared to what the trawlers are bringing in," he said. But when law protected the rockfish, both small and large fishermen were curtailed by roughly 90 percent, said Johnson.

Hook-and-line fishermen are now allowed to bring in 2,500 pounds of fish every two months during the fishing season, whereas large commercial boats bring in 30,000 pounds.

"I just don't see how there isn't room for a few people to keep doing it," Churchman said. "It's a big ocean and I don't see how the few fish me and Rob [Knowles] catch with a fishing pole are tipping the

balance of the ecosystem.

Then there is the matter of where those fish can be caught. Hook-and-line fishermen can only fish safely to 1,000 feet, but many areas with depths under 1,200 feet are now in RCAs.

"I am supposed to stay outside of certain coordinates," Churchman said. "So, I drew a little pencil line on my chart, and then I went along where I think that line is, looking for spots that I could fish."

He found two high points, each about the size of a football field, where the species that he wanted to catch could be found on what he thought was the legal side of the line. He has fished there for the last five years.

However, about three years ago the line was moved deeper, and Churchman didn't realize the change had been made. Last week, he got a call informing him that, according to the VMS, he was in violation of his permit.

"I have been calling them and asking, 'How am I doing? Am I on the right side of the line?'" he said. "They always said, 'We can't tell you that.'"

Even though he is hoping to only receive a slap on the wrist for his first violation, Churchman still will have to find a new fishing ground, learn new techniques, go broke, or give up. But even if he isn't catching them, no one is going to stop eating fish.

"I went down to the Bolinas store to-

Please see **facing page**

July 24, 2008 POINT REYES LIGHT



Josh Churchman is one of the last commercial rock cod fishermen left. He has been fishing along the Marin and Sonoma coasts for over 30 years. Photo by J. Charles.

day, and they have red snapper—but it all comes from Canada,” Churchman said. “The tuna comes from Hawaii and the tilapia is farm raised god-knows where. All three fish that you can buy in Bolinas, down by the sea, come from thousands of

miles away—and this is one of the richest oceans in the world. This is an oasis. That’s another ironic thing: you can’t have any fishing in the richest ocean in the world.”

Fear of the sea

GUEST COLUMN
BY JOSH CHURCHMAN

People ask many questions. "Are you ever scared to go out in the ocean?" is one I get all the time. My usual response is, "Absolutely."

The day you are not afraid of the ocean is the day you should quit going out on it. I believe this is one of those universal truths: any healthy respect contains a bit of fear. There is the wind and the waves, the whales and the sharks; there are days of thick fog and a coastline full of rocks. Then there is the ocean. She really does not care, one way or another, about your well being. And now, there is our government's new approach to a boat on the water. Of all the things to fear it is the last I fear the most.

Being pulled over in your car by the Highway Patrol is mellow compared to being pulled over by the Coast Guard in a boat. In the car it is one guy with a gun, in the boat, it is closer to ten armed men. They launch the little boat out the back of the big boat and the little boat has six big guys on it. The big boat "stands by" as the little one does the boarding. The

big boat has a pair of 50-millimeter machine guns mounted on the bow, and the bow is pointing at you. The last time I was boarded I had my hands in the air. Too many TV cop shows I guess, but I couldn't help it.

I got a letter last week stating that I had been "randomly selected" to take a federal observer with me the next time I went out. What the letter really said was that it is illegal for me to untie my boat without notifying a federal observer no less than 24 hours prior to departure, and no more than 36 hours in advance. This federal order is for all trips made in July and August. If I skip that two-month period, it advances to the next two months until I actually take the observer fishing. Can you imagine being a plumber and getting a letter like that?

The worst idea our government has had for keeping a watchful eye on the boats in the sea is a thing they call VMS, the infamous Vessel Monitoring System. Six years ago I got another letter from the federal government (NOAA) stating that all boats fishing ground fish (fish that like to live near the bottom) needed to buy, and professionally install, a VMS (GPS satellite tracking system).

It is a cute little box with red and green blinking lights. It has two antennas and it

must be giving a signal all day every day. It cost \$1,600 to buy, \$500 to install, and \$29.99 a month to maintain. I use that boat once or twice a month and I wonder if I am just plain stupid to keep at it.

It was the four-hour meeting with the "special agents" that really put the fear of the sea in me. Apparently I was a quarter mile inside a line. My own GPS tracking system provides indisputable proof of the error of my ways. Twenty-five miles from shore, in a 20-foot boat, in 1000 feet of water, and I am in serious trouble.

It is a world gone mad. If we are not careful it is a world coming to you too. First it is the fishermen, and then it will be the truckers. From there it will spread out to where a small GPS tracking device will be implanted in every child, prior to release from any hospital. You may think this silly, or improbable, but I have been living with mine for six years now and I still have not grown to love it.

In all those six years I have only seen one other boat out where I once fished off Bodega Bay. Think about all the government spending that went into eliminating me as a fisherman; the observer program, that now has nobody to observe in this section of coastline; the VMS technical staff and the makers of the VMS system, and all the "special agents"

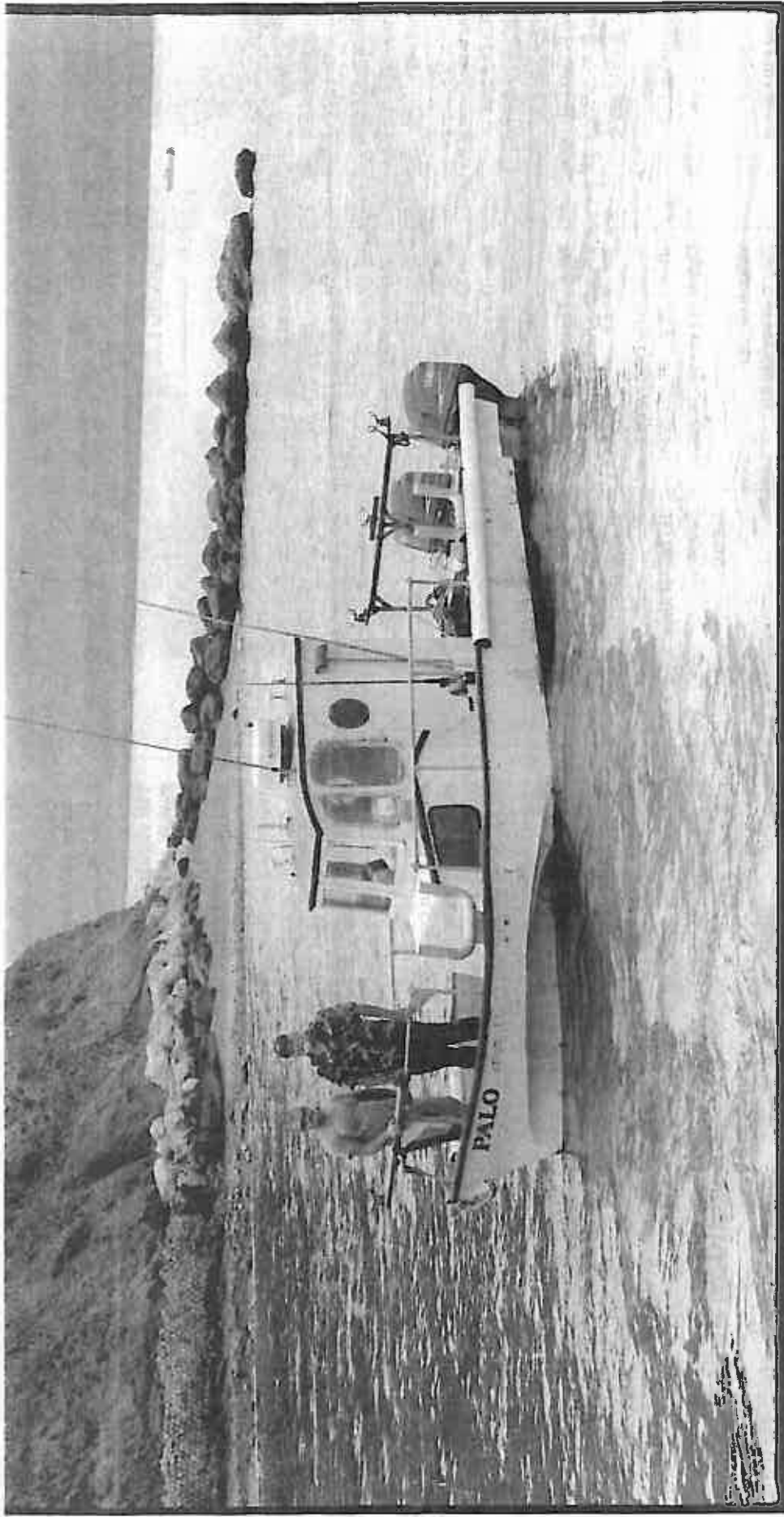
it takes to enforce those laws; the Coast Guard, boarding the same two boats over and over again because there are no other boats; and the State Fish and Game laws that need a team of officers and backup as well.

Do I fear the sea? Absolutely. I have come to terms with the wind and the waves, the fog and the whales, the allure and the mystery. It is our government that I fear most on the water, and it is their new presence that may keep me from going out. Do not let your children grow up to be fishers, and do not expect to see any "local" fish in any markets either. The new system needs some fine-tuning.

Write to the editor



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THE LAST HOOK-AND-LINE ROCK COD FISHERMEN IN WEST MARIN — COMING INTO MARSHALL BOAT WORKS ON TOMALES BAY

Josh Churchman, pictured on the right, hand built this boat in 1972 in Bolinas and has been fishing out of Bolinas and Bodega Bay for over 30 years. Rob, on the left, has been Josh's fishing partner for over two decades. They fish with fishing poles. Josh's permit allows him to catch up to 2,500 lbs of rock fish every two months throughout the year. The large commercial boats, which use nets, have limits of up to 30,000 pounds for the same two month period. Josh and Rob fish 25 miles off the West Marin coast on the shallow edges of the continental shelf in an area called the Cordell Bank. They consider this area to be one of the best rock cod fishing grounds in the world. It has been difficult for the small fisherman to keep up with the current financial and legal parameters demanded by federal and state agencies. On January 1st of this year, there were five hook and line fishermen working out of West Marin. By February 2008, after the federal government required all fishermen to have Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS) installed on their boats, only two fishermen remained. By June, because of a VMS violation, another was gone and Josh and Rob were the only ones left. As of last week, because of a the same VMS violation, Josh and Rob may be finished as well. The only area Josh and Rob may now be able to legally fish is in very deep water, at least 1,200 feet deep and beyond 25 miles. This is a difficult endeavor for small boats. Please see the story by Jacoba Charles on page 10.