

For this Weekly Update we wanted to highlight one of the other people fighting hard to bring awareness to the many issues facing our fishermen

Joe Romano, a commercial fisherman turned fishmonger who, along with his brother and a friend, has grown their grassroots business from 3 guys and a pickup truck to multiple permanent locations with over 60 employees. All the while staying true to and promoting local seafood to their ever-growing customer base.

You can find the following article and more like it at Joe's Substack:

[NC Fisheries Ideas](#)

For the People, For the Table: A Defense of North Carolina's Fishermen and Their Gear

*When you strip away the politics, lawsuits, and acronyms, what remains is something as old as humanity itself: **people setting out to harvest food so that others can eat.***

That is what commercial fishermen do. With gill nets, with trawls, with tongs or pots—we measure and we harvest. Not for trophies. Not for recreation. Not for entertainment.

We fish because this labor is the bridge between the ocean and the dinner table. Without that labor, seafood doesn't reach kitchens, school cafeterias, or family cookouts. Without it, access disappears.

And that access is not a luxury.

It is a **public right.**

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The Public Right to Seafood

Every North Carolinian has an unalienable right to their state's natural resources. The law requires a license and demands compliance with regulations, and yes—those rights can be suspended if rules are broken.

But whether you cast a line on a pier or set a net in the sound, you are exercising a right rooted in independence and connection to nature.

There is, however, a critical difference:

- **Fishing for yourself** → individual right: self-sufficiency, independence, the satisfaction of catching your own meal.
- **Fishing for others** → public right: when you shoulder the work so that a grandmother in Greensboro, a single mother in Raleigh, or a college student in Charlotte can sit down to a plate of fried flounder or wild-caught shrimp.

Commercial fishermen extend access to the millions who cannot catch their own. Without them, wild seafood becomes the privilege of the few who have boats, time, and gear.

With them, seafood remains what it has always been in this state: **food for the people.**

Labor Over Luxury

Fishing is not sport.

It is **labor.**

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A net stretched in the water. A trawl pulled across the bottom. Oysters lifted with tongs.
Crab pots shook by hand.

Each method is deliberate, tied to seasons and tides, measured by the public meals
provided by a day's labor.

Most recreational fishermen understand this reality. They fish to put food on the table, to
share a meal with their families, to taste the connection to their coast.

That is different from the small but vocal subset of anglers who chase trophies or fish only
for the thrill of the fight—the satisfaction of yanking a hooked fish to the boat and then
releasing it, as if food were secondary.

Commercial fishermen stand closest to the food chain because **feeding others is our
purpose.**

Where some see sport, we see sustenance.

Where some seek recreation, we carry responsibility.

It is not glamorous, but it is essential.

Gill Nets: Efficient, Regulated, and Necessary

Few tools in fishing are as misunderstood—and as unfairly maligned—as the gill net. For
hundreds of years, nets have provided North Carolina with affordable, abundant seafood.

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They are also among the most tightly regulated gear in the state. Soak times, mesh sizes, seasons, and locations are strictly controlled. Fishermen must follow precise rules for how, when, and where nets are deployed.

Critics say gill nets are “too effective.” But efficiency is not a flaw—it is the very point of commercial fishing. The task is to catch fish so that others can eat.

The Division of Marine Fisheries relies on gill nets for its own science. They are the backbone of state surveys on abundance, providing consistent, reliable data. In fact a big part of the scientific picture is balancing fisheries independent data from the NCDMF gill net surveys and fisheries dependent data gained through trip ticket system and commercial gill netters.

Gill nets are not relics of the past. Properly managed, they ensure **efficiency, affordability, and sustainability**. They are both a tool for science and an efficient selective tool for harvest.

Trawling: Managed, Measured, and Misunderstood

Shrimp trawling has been cast as the villain of the coast. Critics call it destructive and indiscriminate. Yet the reality, supported by both science and experience, is far more nuanced.

North Carolina’s shrimpers already face some of the nation’s strictest regulations: bycatch reduction devices, turtle excluders, seasonal closures, head rope limitations, and limited access zones.

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Meanwhile, studies suggest that well-managed trawling can actually **increase productivity** by stirring nutrients, feeding benthic life, and creating opportunities for fish and crabs (Corbett et al., 2004; Deehr, 2012).

Like plowing a field, trawling disturbs the bottom, but that disturbance can also regenerate it. Imagine if managers allowed controlled experiments in some of our so-called “dead bottoms”—areas closed to shrimping for decades. If trawling truly destroys habitat beyond recovery, then why hasn’t life returned in those untouched zones?

And the alternative to less trawling? **Import dependence.**

Today, more than 90% of shrimp eaten in the United States is imported—mostly farm-raised in countries with weak environmental and labor standards. Many of those imports are raised with antibiotics banned in the U.S.

North Carolina wild shrimp, by contrast, are clean, nutrient-rich, and harvested by local families.

Cutting trawls does not save ecosystems.

It hands seafood production to foreign countries while eroding the working waterfront at home.

The Human Chain

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From ocean to hand, from hand to market, from market to table—this is the chain. Break one link, and the system fails.

- When the gill netter sets her net, she isn't just catching fish—she is feeding a family she will never meet.
- When the shrimper pulls his trawl, he isn't just stocking his freezer—he is stocking the cooler of a neighborhood seafood market.
- When the tonger lifts oysters, he isn't just piling rocks for himself—he is fueling restaurants, tourism, and tradition.
- When the crabber hauls his pots, he isn't just filling a bushel basket—he is carrying forward a heritage of shared food.

This is the quiet dignity of the work.

It is not about self. It is about others.

Independence or Conflict

North Carolina stands at a crossroads.

We can honor the distinction between private right and public right—between fishing for self and fishing for others—and build a system that preserves both.

Or we can continue down the path of conflict: neighbor against neighbor, lawsuits, allocation battles, and endless “fish wars.”

That path breeds scarcity, not abundance. It hands decision-making to bureaucrats pressured by lobbyists rather than guided by the working waterfront.

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No government can fully manage the ocean.

What it can do is create space for **collaboration—or conflict.**

A Matter of Access

At the heart of it all is access. Who gets to eat from the sea?

If we strip away commercial fishing—if we reduce seafood access to a private sport—we deny millions of North Carolinians the chance to share in their coast's abundance.

We already accept that farmers grow food for others. We don't tell them to only plant what they can eat themselves.

Fishermen are no different. They are ocean farmers. Their fields are shared and move with the tide.

And just as a farmer's wheat feeds more than his household, so does a fisherman's catch.

That is the multiplier of public right.

That is why this work matters.

The Case for Sanity

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Policy today too often misses this truth. Regulators bury themselves in acronyms, stock assessments, and allocation formulas, while special-interest lawsuits drain resources from science and management.

But the fundamental question is simple:

Will seafood remain part of the public commons, or will it be privatized into a trophy system?

The government's role should not be to pick winners and losers. Its role is to preserve access for all, to ensure regulations do not choke the lifeline they are supposed to protect, and to keep seafood flowing from ocean to table.

Once access is gone, it does not come back.

Conclusion

Fishermen who labor for others do not ask for privilege. They ask for recognition of the difference.

They are not taking more than their share—they are laboring so that others may share.

Fishing for yourself is an **individual right**.

Fishing for others is a **public right**.

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One is about independence. The other about collaboration. Both matter. Both should endure.

The question before us is whether we will honor that collaboration—or collapse into a zero-sum conflict.

At the end of the day, the ocean feeds us all.

And fishermen are the hands that make it possible.

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