

Interview
With
FRANK TURSI
In
Newport,
North Carolina

Interviewed by Barbara Garrity-Blake

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Transcribed by Mary Williford

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BARBARA GARRITY-BLAKE: Okay So. I am Barbara Garrity-Blake, and it's May 24th, 2016 and I am here at the Coastal Federation--North Carolina Coastal Federation headquarters, talking to Mister Frank Tursi. So, Frank, why don't we start off, before we get into thoughts about the Fisheries Reform Act, can you just give us a little background information about where you were born, where you grew up, and how you came to get involved in, you know, environmental fisheries, coastal issues.

FRANK TURSI: Sure. Sure. I was born in Brooklyn, New York. I jokingly tell people I grew up on an island, which is technically true! You laugh, I see, but it is the western end of Long Island, I grew up in a neighborhood called Sheepshead Bay back in the 1950s, two blocks from the bay. At the time, the bay, you could still safely eat what you caught out of the bay; I spent much of my childhood with my feet dangling over a pier or over a sea wall along Sheepshead Bay. When I was about ten years old, my uncle bought a house--well, 'house' is a euphemism--bought a little cottage in Lindenhurst, Long Island, the middle part of Long Island on the Great South Bay. Lindenhurst then was like much of North Carolina coast is now; the great exodus from New York City had not begun yet, it was potato fields and salt marshes. The house was one of only two on the block--sand block, on the sandy path that led to the beach. We were within a clamshell throw of the beach and for several summers, from the time I was nine years old until the time I was twelve or thirteen, my cousin and I, who was two years younger than I, spent entire summers roaming the empty beaches of Lindenhurst, gigging eels and scooping up crabs and, looking back on it all now, I realize those were the seeds of the environmentalism which drove most of my life, where they were first planted.

BGB: Yeah. Can I interrupt for a second?

FT: Sure.

BGB: When this A.C. [air conditioning] came on, is it going to go off?

FT: It's on thermostat; you can go cut it.

BGB: Can we cut it off? 'Cause I'm worried that it's interfering with this. Let's pause this a second. So we're resuming, hopefully with better audio now that the A.C. is off. Alright so Frank, you were talking about growing up on the coast in New York.

FT: I grew up in--you know, New York is a maritime city and most people forget that fact of geography, but there is no--it's surrounded by water. In the 1950s, when I grew up, it was not the way it's always been. You know, it's been a major metropolitan area for a very long time, but the waters were still fishable, swimmable, I used to ride my bike out to Plumb Beach along Belt Parkway and Plumb Beach was at the end of the runway of what was then Idlewild Airport, what's now Kennedy International Airport, and actually there were plumb trees that you could actually still eat the plumbs. We'd fish off the beach. A lot of my activities as a kid was based around the water. And so, you know, that is really here it all started for me, as far as my interest in coastal issues and the environment. As odd as it seems to sound, you know, growing up in a major, America's major metropolitan area. But New York was a cool place to grow up in the 1950s, for a kid.

BGB: So what brought you to North Carolina?

FT: Um, my father was in the garment industry, the garment industry fled south for the same reasons that they now, that it now, that it has fled overseas: cheap labor, no unions, cheap land. So in 1960s, much of the industry left New York City for southern states. So, his company bought an existing clothing company in Asheville and I moved to the mountains of North Carolina, where I went to high school. And there I quickly, obviously, we were 400 miles from the ocean, so I quickly became enamored with mountain streams and brook trout and brown trout

and traded in my saltwater fishing rod for a fly rod. I have always fished--I have fished since I was five or six years old, and continue to this day. So it's--and it's really what--it's that activity, that avocation, that kept me in contact with the watery world. And even in Asheville, I spent a lot of time on the French Broad River, Lake James. Went to college at East Carolina [University] where I got a little closer to the ocean.

BGB: M hm. What was your major?

FT: English and Geology. My professor was Stan Riggs, who I credit Stan--

BGB: Let me shut this door.

FT: --Yeah. [Pause] Stan was one of two people who I think really inspired me and I was saying to Stan the other day and told him--but one of two people who really inspired me at East Carolina. Stan--it was Stan and his classes that I first got the real understanding. You know, Geology is a weird scientific discipline because the long view is really long.

BGB: Yeah!

[LAUGHTER]

FT: And I soon realized through Stan and, you know, this was at a time when, in the late 1960s, when the whole, what was then called Plate Tectonics was a fairly revolutionary concept. It really wasn't proven yet; it was still theoretical, this weird stuff about the solid ground under our feet actually moving! But it was with Stan and his Geology courses that really gave me the first understanding of--and I was fascinated with how oceans formed and opened and closed and rose and fell, all based on, you know, all tied to climatic conditions. So, I started getting a full understanding of how interconnected it all is, and it was at East Carolina where I fell into my profession. I started working for the school newspaper. The second person who inspired me, Bob Thonen, the radical editor of *The Fountainhead* newspaper at East Carolina, it was a very radical

time: Vietnam War protests and journalism was very exciting. And Bob ran, we ran a real newspaper at *The Fountainhead* and I loved it, never left really, and didn't go to East Carolina with any intention of becoming a newspaperman, but that's what I became. So, when I left East Carolina, I just got a series of newspaper jobs, and finally it was at the *Winston-Salem Journal* where I was the Environmental Reporter that I intersected with the Fisheries Reform Act, covering it as a news story. That was my original involvement.

BGB: Okay, so you worked for the newspaper when that all started to happen? Ah, I didn't realize that!

FT: Yep, yep, I was covering it a newspaper writer.

BGB: Wow, okay. I was thinking you were already with the Coastal Federation.

FT: No, no, no, I didn't join the Coastal Federation until 2002.

BGB: Wow. So as a reporter, tell us about that experience.

FT: About being a reporter? [Laughs]

BGB: Well, about reporting on something as--something that a lot of people maybe would find obscure.

FT: Right. Well, again, it was my interest in fishing and I was very, very fortunate, looking back on it all now, to have worked at a time in American journalism when getting the story was really all that mattered. You know, there certainly were budgetary constraints, but you were still, I mean, you were expected to go out and get the story and I was very fortunate to have worked for a series of Editors who let me follow my nose. You know, good reporters, you generally don't have to tell them what to do. [MICROPHONE INTERFERENCE] I'd like to think that I was one of the good ones! So clearly, when the [Fisheries] Reform movement--clearly, what really--and what I wrote a series of stories on and still going on today,

unfortunately, is the conflict between recreational and commercial fishing. Which, I think much of it is needless. Some of it is real. But it was this conflict what originally drew me to this whole policy issue. And I think it was the conflict, that issue, that fueled that issue. And so, you know, there are, I don't know what the numbers are, but you know how many millions of recreational fishermen there are, certainly there are probably very few commercial fishermen in Winston-Salem, but there certainly are many, many recreational fishermen who would be affected by reforms in the law. So that was the newspaper's interest, is informing a great percentage of its readers about policy changes that would affect something they enjoyed doing. But that's how I originally got involved in that. And, you know, got to meet all the great characters that drove that process! Jule Wheatly, and Jule was--one of the great things about a career in Journalism is--I guess it's still true but certainly it was true the thirty, thirty-five years I was in it--was the great and unusual characters that I met all across the state, and Jule was certainly one of them!

[Laughs]

BGB: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Who else do you remember that--vivid personalities?

FT: The Chairman, um, what was his name?

BGB: Bob Lucas.

FT: Bob Lucas. No, Bob, Bob was a visionary in a lot of ways, who saw a lot of what was possible before anyone else did. And he was really the driving, I mean--I'd have to stop to really think about all the meetings, but Bob was clearly the driving force that kept it all together. He was a perfect choice of Chairman.

BGB: Yeah. I agree. When you said earlier that you felt like the ongoing, deeply-embedded conflict between commercial and recreational fishermen was part of the driving force, how so?

FT: Well, I think it was the recreational fishermen have always outnumbered commercial fishermen, certainly do today. And it was that group of fishermen's perception [MICROPHONE INTERFERENCE] whether those perceptions were real or not, but it was their perceptions that there was something wrong with regulations that, that certain species were on the decline, that more needed to be done to protect a species. These, clearly, I think, it what drove the whole reform, to try and find some better regulation, some better way to actually protect. And the money--and you know, [Senator Marc] Basnight was also a big player in this, mostly behind the scenes--because clearly there needed to be a dedicated source of money. And we did not have a saltwater fishing license, though we have had freshwater licenses for as long as I've fished in North Carolina, but it was a new concept for saltwater. Basnight was resistant until the very end, and--but if we were going to do the research, do the data collection that was going to be needed, we had to pay for it all. So clearly some way had to be found to raise that money, and so the license became obvious, became an obvious strategy. And Basnight was resistant for a while, and then finally relented and, I don't recall now why, it's too bad. I don't guess Bob and Marc--I don't think it's possible. It's too bad, because I'm not really clear. Lucas could probably--there was something that triggered the change.

BGB: Yeah, because that came a couple, three years after the passage of the Fisheries-- maybe even longer than that.

FT: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Something happened to trigger the change and I'm not really sure what it is; I'd be speculating. But Basnight was resistant. It wasn't getting through the legislature. I don't remember if there had actually been attempts, if bills were actually introduced, I don't remember. But it was clear that a licensing bill just wasn't gonna get through until several years later, you're right.

BGB: Did you ever interview Senator Basnight?

FT: Oh yeah. Many times.

BGB: So what was that like?

FT: He was, again, one of the main characters. Marc is, Marc was--I've always said that he is the perfect example of the Citizen-Legislator. Guy came from rather meager background in Dare County, didn't know very much about environmental protection and was antagonistic, as most men of his time and profession were. But slowly grew into the role and became very sophisticated towards the end of his career, became very sophisticated in his understanding of environmental connections. And while his career as, long-time career as President of the State Senate, is somewhat mixed, I think you could, you could point to some things that probably aren't that admirable. I think on the whole, though, I think he did a great deal of good for the coast. And there won't be anyone like him again; those times are gone, the power has shifted away from coastal areas and the coast will never have another champion like they had in Marc. But he used to call me--what was his woman that was his long-time--?

BGB: Norma?

FT: Norma! I'd call Norma and I'd say, 'I need to speak to Senator Basnight.' She'd say, 'Frank, he's on the floor, I'll get the message to him.' And invariably, he would call me on his-- you know, they would break, they wouldn't work on Fridays, they still don't work on Fridays. So he'd leave Raleigh either late Thursday or early Friday and he would call me from, like, Williston. [Laughs]

BGB: Williamston!

FT: Huh?

BGB: It had to be Williamston, not Williston! [Laughs]

FT: Williamston, not Williston. Williamston. He'd call me from [U.S. Highway] 64 somewhere on his way to Manteo, and once you got Marc talking, you couldn't get him to shut up. And it would be this rolling travelogue over the next fifty miles [laughs] I'm certain if I let it go on all the way to Manteo! Within the first ten minutes, I got what I needed, and then it was just, you know, pissed-off Marc Basnight. And it would be this, you know, he'd roll through Columbia and he'd say, 'Darn, we gotta do somethin' about that road, that road ain't right, we gotta do somethin' about that road.' And then we'd go through, go over the bridge at Alligator River, he'd say, 'Damn, we gotta build another bridge here, I don't need to get stuck at the bridge when the drawbridge goes up!' He'd get pissed-off that he was stuck at the drawbridge. And it [laughs] I'd finally say, 'Senator, I really gotta go.' 'I understand! I understand!' But I look back on that now and, you know, cherish those moments where me and Marc, in his car, rolling through, rolling down 64. But he was, he was a real, real character and really grew in that role as coastal protector. He, yeah he still, he had blind spots, he had a blind spot for those damn jetties at Oregon Inlet and you couldn't convince him otherwise. He had one or two of those, but by and large, he had, he understood coastal people and cherished coastal culture. On the whole, I think his record is a positive one, though there was some potholes here and there.

[LAUGHTER]

BGB: So, are there any other characters that you, that come to mind, whether legislators or--?

FT: During that?

BGB: Yeah, during that whole experience. You probably talked to so many people!

FT: Well, I did, but you know, unfortunately, journalists, you talk to so many that it all becomes sort of this blur and unless you've got your notes, which I unfortunately never kept, the

details of--you know, you weren't--you were doing this and you knew this particular issue was an important policy issue for fisheries management, but you got so caught up in the demands of getting that daily story, having the opportunity to step back and think, introspectively, about things, you rarely got that opportunity. So, the details of it all are a bit--I remember highlights here and there but without referring to notes or going back and looking at stories.

BGB: That's alright. So, all in all, you know, you talk about that the whole Reform Act movement was born of a conflict and one user group's ideas of what needs to happen versus another user group; all in all, how do you, how did you think the process unfolded? Did you think it was fair? Do you think the various people were fairly represented?

FT: I think so. Yeah. And there were a lot of arguments and debates about that, but--and that's one of the things that Lucas was, Lucas was a very fair-minded guy, and he was cognizant of the perceptions and the conflicts, and he tried his best to make sure everyone had a voice. And I think it was. I think probably commercial fishermen probably have a different view of that, but it was a changing time and I don't think the industry still has adjusted. I think I'm beginning to see some signs of real adjustment, but the days of when you can go out and catch thousands of pounds of stuff are gone. We all point fingers as to what the causes were, but clearly those days are gone, clearly--and I always got the sense that commercial fishermen understanding how vastly outnumbered they were by the recreational and how better, um, plugged in recreational fishermen were to the power structures. That, commercial fishermen, they fought the licensing, and that's why Basnight was opposed to it for years, because commercial fishermen did not want a licensing program, because they understood that once recreational fishermen started putting some skin on the table, the licensing money would far, far outweigh what commercial licenses were and would give, then, recreational fishermen real power. And that, I think, is what

happened. But that, you know, there was--thing were changing such that it was like trying to stop the flood, it just, there was no way they could've stopped it. Clearly, a source of money was needed; nothing was gonna get done without some money. And, you know, other than--I remember there were other schemes that were, you know, taxes on boats, but nothing raised the money and gave people real investment in the process than a license. As it did with freshwater; you had that whole model, very successful model in the freshwater licensing. So, you know, fishing licenses are something people are used to paying, and they see real good out of it. So that was always the preferred way to raise revenue, but the commercial guys are against it because they understood the political power that comes with the money and I think that's exactly what's happened, and it's the reason why Basnight was so opposed to it all those years.

BGB: Yeah. Were you at that fateful meeting in Raleigh when they were debating the Fisheries Reform Act bill and busloads of fishermen--?

FT: Yes.

BGB: Did you cover that?

FT: Ah, I have a vague memory of it! [Laughs]

BGB: Yeah, yeah. What do you think was going on there? Just, more of what you're saying

FT: I think so, I think--you know, I think the conflict was what drove that whole, um, drove that whole process. And that day was an outward manifestation of it. The commercial guys just looked at it as more onerous regulations. They said they saw the licensing as a way that would empower recreational fishermen who, they knew, vastly outnumbered them and were better-connected than they were. And so, I think that there was a real effort to try to derail a lot of this. It was ultimately not successful and I think it was, it needed, something needed to be done

and what eventually happened was the best we could've hoped for. So--but that rancor exists to this day, and it's unfortunate and I'm not sure it'll ever go away.

BGB: Did you also cover the coastal habitat protection plan process?

FT: M hm. Well, a lot of it, I was here.

BGB: Okay, so that's when you transitioned to here?

FT: Yeah, I came here in 2002, and that was--it was just starting, but for a lot of that, I was here, 'cause in fact I worked with what's-his-name who's retired from Marine Fisheries who was head of the--?

BGB: Oh, Mike Street?

FT: Mike Street. And, in fact, we wrote a lot of those original chapters in the plan.

BGB: So what do you--how do you feel about that aspect of the Fisheries Reform Act: this coastal habitat protection plan?

FT: It's a wonderful concept, but that's all it is.

BGB: Why?

FT: Nothing's ever been done, to my knowledge. They update the plan, they were supposed to integrate, y'know, permitting and, I mean, I don't really see any evidence of that. So I just don't [sighs] again, it was a good concept and well-intentioned, but in the work-a-day of permitting and the way business gets conducted, I don't really see it as much of an influence on how permits, whether permits are--I mean, I never hear it in any discussion about why something shouldn't be done because it violates a habitat protection plan. So--and that's the same thing with, to a lesser degree, things like C.A.M.A. [Coastal Area Management Act] land use plans. C.A.M.A. land use plans are in it because all the local governments are required to have one, so they are more ingrained in local ordinance, but it's superficial at best. So, those kinds of attempts

of centralized planning look good on the surface, and are well-intentioned, but they never really work because our system of government and the way we, the conflict that drive permitting just don't allow that kind of planning [laughs] to tell you the truth!

BGB: So what does work, Frank?

FT: As far as protecting fisheries? Clearly--I think you can point to the red drum, for instance--clearly, a license can work. I can remember fifteen years ago, it was rare to catch a red drum on the North Carolina coast. Now? Caught two last Saturday.

BGB: Yeah, and part of the Reform Act was the establishment of these Fisheries Management Plans for the first time.

FT: Correct, correct.

BGB: And I believe the red drum was, I think blue crab was first, but it was up there. It was one of the first.

FT: You know, that's a real success story. And I have watched fishermen, I even kept the red drum--you only keep one, but I ain't kept one in years. People--and I don't know if it was being the state fish and all that--but fishermen, at least recreational fishermen, treat 'em with some reverence. And so--and now they're, I mean, the White Oak River, when I moved on the river in 2002, you didn't catch any red drum in the river. Somewhere, maybe 2006, '7, caught a few small ones. Now, you can go in there, you can catch twenty-five, thirty-inch red drum in the White Oak River. White Oak River's one of the best fishing holes on the North Carolina coast that very few people know about!

BGB: They do now!

FT: Um, it's a very dangerous river! You don't want to go up the White Oak River! Lot of oyster rocks, the channel's not well-marked!

[LAUGHTER]

FT: No, and that is all true. And it's the reason that the White Oak is not fished as much as it is. The Coast Guard doesn't really maintain that channel, and if you miss the channel, you're not going to run into sandbar, you will run into oyster rock and there's not a fishing season doesn't go by that boats aren't almost destroyed on those oyster rocks. So it has acquired a reputation, which is a good thing. But the point being that, you know, red drum now is, fishing is very good along most of the North Carolina coast. You find the fishing places where, in my lifetime, you hadn't found 'em before. And that's all due to a well-thought-out management plan and regulatory scheme that have brought that fish back. Now, I will say--you look at something like southern flounder, at the decimated population despite years of regulations, years of limiting catch sizes, raising size limits: the difference between the two fish is one is a very popular commercial catch and one is not. And so, clearly, the survival of a species or the health of a species seems to be clearly tied to its popularity as a seafood, along the seafood table. If it's a popular restaurant fish, then it, you know, guy's gonna go out and get it. So, one thing that saved the red drum is that it's not real, it's not a real popular food fish, particularly when--can't remember, who is that French cook, when the red drum, black drum--?

BGB: In Louisiana.

FT: --in Louisiana, came out against it. And so, it's not a real popular--[coughs]. And that is true of, you know, you can go down the species list. But tools like management plans and catch limits and size limits, all that can help, clearly can. And the red drum is a perfect example of that.

BGB: So, um, Frank, when you consider--.

FT: Now I was also, by the way, Chairman of the first Citizen Advisory Committee for

the C.R.F.L. Grants.

BGB: Ah, I didn't know that. Tell our listeners what that is.

FT: Coastal Recreational Fishing License, better known as C.R.F.L. The money that, whatever it is now, fifteen dollars a year for residents, that money goes into two trust funds. One trust fund cannot be used, is untouchable, for a certain number of years. And the other fund is used every year for grants, for a whole variety of, a lot of boat ramps you see along the coast--it can only be used for grants or projects that enhance access to the water or further our understanding of certain fish species of recreations--'cause again, this is a license that is generated by recreational fishermen--so the money can only be used for those projects that advance the understanding or the betterment of recreational fishing. So, the money is used for a lot of high-dollar, such as boat ramps; it's also used for a lot of scientific studies on various species. It's--you have to either be a university or a local government or a state agency to qualify for the grant money, and I've always thought that was too restrictive, that they need to allow N.G.O.s [Non-Governmental Organizations] to also qualify, 'cause a lot of non-profit groups do a lot of good work. And they tap into the fund now, but they partner with the university or one of the qualified, one of the qualified classes. And about, I don't know, four or five million dollars a year is doled out in grants. With this large pot of money growing, the secondary fund that isn't used--and I'm not quite sure what it's being saved for. And it's an odd, the structure's rather odd because the State Wildlife Resources Commission, which regulates freshwater fisheries, already had a licensing program in place, when the legislature did pass the licensing program, they didn't want to recreate the wheel. So, that program is under the auspices of Wildlife Resources Commission, which has its own commission and Marine Fisheries has its own regulatory commission. And so, they appoint people from each of those commissions to a separate

subcommittee to make recommendations on how this money is spent out of the C.R.F.L. license. So the way that now--the Wildlife Resources Commission does not have, never has, an advisory group. The Marine Fisheries Commission decided it would appoint a group of people who were involved in some fashion of recreational fishermen, either fishermen themselves or pier owners or charter boat captains or something. So, we had a committee that I co-chaired with a charter boat captain here in Morehead City whose name I forgot, for several years, in which we would screen all the--all the grant proposals, make recommendations to this subcommittee of the two commissions, and then they would then, from those, they would then pick the winners or the money, the people they wanted to give money to. 'Til one day, I got a letter in the mail that I was fired! [chuckles] WE apparently, what happened over time was the Division of Marine Fisheries was letting us see fewer and fewer grant proposals, and I have various suspicions about that, and I'm not gonna get into it here. But pretty soon, we were only seeing a third of--they have it broken down into science--there's three categories--and then the 'people' category, which is the boat ramps and 'take a kid fishing' and the various--and that's all we were seeing, which is a small percentage of the money. So, we complained about it, said we wanted to go back to the old way in which we saw everything, but you know, they told us we just didn't understand the science, what did we know about the science, and they have fisheries Biologists and all these experts and what did we know? And we complained and we complained until one day, I and every other member of that committee got a letter: Thank you for your service, but you're no longer--we're disbanding the committee. So now, there is no public review!

BGB: Wow!

FT: It is all done internally by the Davison of Marine Fisheries. They will have--once they go through their internal culling process, they have one day, they have a public meeting in

which all they do is go over those who are going to get money. You don't see everyone who applied. So, that breeds suspicion and that needs to be looked at very carefully, and recreational fishermen need to understand that their money is not being reviewed in any public fashion, that decisions are being made within a Division that is, manages marine fisheries, and it's a system that need to be carefully looked at. Off the record, I could tell you what I think, but I--.

BGB: Well. And some might argue, it flies in the face of the spirit of the Fisheries Reform Act.

FT: I think it does. I bumped into somebody at Karen [Amspacher]'s museum, I forget who it was, he said they're trying to reconstitute the committee. I don't know, I've not heard anything about that. But this was at the--we were fired at the--I'm told, though how much I believe, I don't know--that this was at the behest of the Chairman of the Marine Fisheries Commission, that this was not something that the Division [of Marine Fisheries] lobbied for. I'm not sure I believe that, but, that this was a decision that was made by the Chairman and I question, at the time, whether a Chairman could make that decision since, I assume, the Commission members were appointed--and I know I was--appointed by the commission. Can a Chairman just un-appoint somebody that the full Commission--I never got, and I just didn't push it, I was pretty sick of it then, the system, by then.

BGB: What year was that?

FT: Maybe two years ago, three years ago.

BGB: Wow. Well, I had no idea--.

FT: There were a lot of upset people. Frank Folb, you know Frank?

BGB: Oh yeah!

FT: Frank was very upset. There was--the guy that co-chaired with me, charter boat

captain in Morehead, he was very upset. What's his name, with C.C.A. [Coastal Conservation Association]? Shoot. Big shot in the C.C.A.

BGB: Dick Brame?

FT: Dick Brame was on that committee, though Dick never showed up. But it came out of the blue.

BGB: Do you remember who was the chair at the time?

FT: I don't, I don't.

BGB: Yeah, I'm trying to remember, too.

FT: And it came out of the blue and we were told, or I was told, that we just upset people by our constant demands to see all the--. So, we were done.

BGB: Wow. Wow. I did not know that. So, considering today, we have issues that have emerged in the last few years that have just become more and more on people's radar, climate change and this and that, if you were revamping the Fisheries--or, first I should ask, do you think the Fisheries Reform Act needs revamping?

FT: Um, I don't know if 'revamping', I think it needs, it probably could use, I hate the word 'tweaking' but it probably needs a second look. There probably could be modifications made. I think the general structure is a good one. To determine what works and what hasn't worked, to reassess some things, might not be bad.

BGB: So, does anything come to mind in particular that you would recommend as needing tweaking?

FT: Um [pause] and again, I think, you know, you'll get different answers depending on which side--I'm sure a commercial fisherman will say a lot needs tweaking. From a recreational standpoint, I think we need to look at the licensing structure. I think there are--for instance--and I

mean, these compromises were made for many political reasons, and maybe they were needed to get people accustomed to paying for a saltwater fishing license. But if you go fish on a fishing pier, you don't need a license. There is a blanket license that covers everybody on that fishing pier; I don't know how many thousands of people fish on fishing piers. If you go fish on a charter boat or a headboat, you don't need a license; the Captain has a blanket license that covers everybody. Those are all compromises that were made to make it more palatable. I don't think we need to do that anymore; we're losing revenue, we're losing data, data collections, so I think in things like that, I think we need to re-look at how that fee is structured. I think the whole, the way that money is spent, there needs to be a mandated public process; there isn't one now and, as I learned, it can be given and taken away by the whims of one person on a regulatory commission. That's not right; it shouldn't be that way. There are probably \$100,000,000 that's been spent; I don't know if there's ever been an audit of how that money was spent. That needs to be done.

BGB: Talking about from the saltwater license?

FT: C.R.F.L., yeah. There is this second trust fund that is accumulating money at a rapid rate; I don't know what it's supposed to be used for, what its purposes are, but there's a big pot of money. And as that pot gets bigger and bigger, it becomes a target for all kinds of things. So, I think the whole process of how the licensing fees are collected, who should pay for them, and the process in which that money is dispersed in project funds needs a serious look. I mean, it basically works, but there's no real accounting and there's no public, no meaningful public review and transparency on how that money is spent. And I think if, I think a lot of recreational fishermen, if they knew how it actually gets done, would not be pleased with it. And what you don't want is a revolt among your recreational fishing group, 'cause I don't think it'd take much

for this legislature to rescind the whole thing since licensing fees are just taxes. So I think we have to be careful going down that road, 'cause I think, I gladly pay my license every year and I think the money is generally used for good things, but I don't think there needs to be a better process in how we spend it, how we account for it. And not let so many people off the hook, so to speak, in not requiring a license. To fish on a pier, you should have a license. If you fish off a charter boat or headboat, you should have a license. So I think that clearly needs to be looked at. You know, as far as--I think the [Fisheries] Management Plans generally work, but [sigh] again, I don't have a lot of faith in central planning aspects 'cause it just doesn't work in other places, I mean, and so I don't know how well they work. I'm sure they all well-intended and based on good science, but we also--I know with the, the science collection, you know, every funding cycle with C.R.F.L., we'd have two or three more proposals for striped bass. How much more do you really need to know about striped bass? I don't know, I'm not a scientist, but it seems like there are species that get a lot of money.

BGB: That's why you got fired!

FT: Maybe!

BGB: Just take the striped bass! [Laughs]

FT: No, we'd make that complaint! There'd be three striped bass projects and, you know. How much more do you need to know about striped bass? Yet, what do we know about river herring? So, I think there are [sigh] and I don't know how you fix that, but clearly there were species that seemed to be getting the bulk of the money. Red drum was one. And others, we knew nothing about. But I don't know how to fix that, I don't know what you do to fix that. So the data collection, I think, the scientific collection of data seems to be, was weighted to particular species and clearly they were popular species among recreational fishermen, which, of

course, means they generated a lot of income. We don't get striped bass this way down the coast, but I know on the northern coast, it's a very popular species that a lot of jobs are dependent on. So I understand, I truly do understand, but really, how much more do you need to know about striped bass? So, um. But I do think that, because I was involved in the whole C.R.F.L. thing, some serious works needs to be done on collecting that revenue and overseeing how it's spent. And I don't mean to imply that I think there was anything illegal or anything going on; it's just, right now, the process is non-transparent. It's opaque. And we have to take the word of people within the bowels of the Division of Marine Fisheries that the money is being properly spent. And it's not that I mistrust folks at Marine Fisheries, but I don't trust any government agency to that extent. And so I think we need a better oversight, public oversight, into how that money is spent. And an audit is really in need to see if the money has been well-spent and what has resulted. Clearly, you can see the benefits of a boat ramp: wasn't there before, now it's there. I understand that. But that's a small percentage of the money. They tend to be, because they're high-dollar projects, particularly if it's building a new boat ramp like the Emerald Isle boat ramp, that usually can't be done all with C.R.F.L. money at that high dollar, so because you're talking about waterfront properties, those do tend--and they're very popular projects. And another thing, I don't know why they started doing this, the committee would recommend that, every year, you put up a sign: this boat ramp brought to you by your tax money, your license money. I don't know if that's ever been done. 'This money built by the coastal recreational fishing license money.' You know, so people know that when they launch their boat, their money paid for this. So, those projects are high-visible projects, highly popular projects, but it's this other stuff where the bulk of money's spent. I don't know whether all those striped bass studies resulted in anything! [Laughs] There was a great suspicion, particularly early on in the C.R.F.L. program,

that money was being shifted from the recreational program to support commercial program. And I remember the very first project cycle, the Division of Marine Fisheries wanted to buy a small shallow-water dredge for their oyster restoration projects, and I remember asking Louis [Daniel, Director of the Division of Marine Fisheries, 1997-2015] whether these were sanctuaries. 'No, these were put-and-take.' I said, 'That's very good, I firmly support commercial shell fishermen, but this is not the pot of money and, in fact, it clearly is prohibited by the law. I was told that they provide, whether it was put-and-take or reefs, they provide habitat for all kinds of fish and though the committee did not recommend that the money be spent for that barge, it was bought. So, there were suspicions, and I still have those suspicions--and now that there's no transparent process, that money is being spent to really support the commercial fishing aspects of the Division [of Marine Fisheries], 'cause they're not getting the licensing money from that program anymore. And I was warned by members of the Marine Fisheries Commission to watch for that cost shifting. And clearly that was happening, and I don't know if continues, but it's another reason why we need to have an aboveboard process for granting this money.

BGB: Can the Division [of Marine Fisheries] use any of the money for their normal operational costs, 'cause I know they've had budget cuts.

FT: Yes, they can.

BGB: They can, okay. So it's been, probably, a godsend to them.

FT: Oh yeah. In fact, they're always among the largest benefactors every year, is the Division of Marine Fisheries. And a lot of it was for, it does support their recreational program, but particularly some of the scientific studies, we thought--and that's why I'm sure we no longer got to see any proposals for the studies! Because a lot of them had very questionable benefits for recreational fishing, and seemed to be more aimed at commercial fish stocks. And so, we kept

making noise. First, we didn't see any more of the scientific proposals, and then they fired us!

[Laughs]

BGB: Gosh. Frank, as an Environmentalist, you know, sometimes I just question-- 'cause we started this question talking about conflict--.

FT: It's getting warm in here!

BGB: It's getting hot in here! So I'm going to end this in a minute.

FT: Good, good, 'cause I gotta get going. Let's see what time it is. [Pause] It is 4:22. We got a little while.

BGB: Okay. I guess, to play devil's advocate: a fish is a fish, a habitat is a habitat. They're all interlinked, interrelated.

FT: Correct. Correct.

BGB: Now we have this concern for ecosystem-based management, so how useful is it to enforce these kind of artificial divisions between 'that's a recreational fish, we're gonna support--?'

FT: No, it's not useful. It's not useful.

BGB: But that's what you're saying.

FT: Um, yeah, but [pause] how the money is spent. Clearly, are you gonna take recreational money to support blue crab fisheries? Yes. Recreational fishermen catch blue crabs, no doubt about it, but clearly commercial, that is one of the backbones of the commercial fishing industry. Same thing with shrimp. Yeah, you can go out there and cast in the White Oak River in July and catch little shrimp in my cast net, but clearly that's not what these studies are doing. So, is it fair? Yes, a fish is a fish, and both recreational and commercial fishermen target certain species, but the preponderance is certainly, on certain species, the great preponderance is a

commercial catch. So, is it fair that a recreational fishing license money be spent to do shrimp research? I don't know. But I think many recreational fishermen would not approve of that, and I'm not sure I do. And I think I'm more understanding of these issues than most are, but I don't know if money spent by recreational fishermen should be used to support research and stock assessments for species that are clearly, that commercial fishermen are clearly dependent on.

BGB: Yeah, well I guess what I'm getting at is, early on, you said that this conflict that's been ongoing, a lot of it is unnecessary. So what, just to kind of end on that thought, because I think North Carolina, more than a lot of other states, does have this conflict. I mean, other states have it, but it seems like it's been particularly--.

FT: Yeah, but I think it's because we have--I mean, we still have a commercial fishing industry, which you couldn't say, I think, in Florida. We still have in-shore trawling and gill nets, which a lot of states have banned. So that creates the conflict. And I think much of the conflict you see between recreational and commercial fishermen deal mostly with gear. I don't think it's so much particular species; I think we could find common ground when it came to whatever, flounder or something, but the fact that the flounder are caught with gill nets and it's very--I can take you up the White Oak River at certain times of the year where it's virtually impossible to fish because of all the gill nets. That's what rankles a lot of people. And so, that's what leads to the conflict, and I think that's why you see it more here in North Carolina than you do in Florida, Georgia, and a lot of states which have limited or banned certain types of commercial fishing gear that's still allowed in North Carolina. And that's where the conflicts are.

BGB: Right. Do you have any suggestions as to how to better, I don't know--manage conflict?

FT: And I don't know how--. [Sigh] The gear issue is a tough one. It really is a tough one.

And I'm not sure I fully understand why that gear is used; commercial fishermen, they're making a living. I mean, I fish for fun; they're fishing to put food on the table. And so they can't fish hook-and-line. They have to fish types of gear that catch a lot of fish. And, unfortunately, some of that gear is indiscriminate in the types of fish it catches. And we put a lot of thought into mesh sizes and all that, but I'm not sure how you get around that conflict, 'cause I do believe if you were to ban in-shore trawling, particularly gill nets, in-shore gill nets, I think it, as it has in other states, I think it'd put--if not be the end of commercial fishermen in North Carolina, it'd be damn close. And I don't want to see that happen. So I don't know how you get around that issue, and that's the tough one, and that's where all the conflict is, or much of the conflict. It's not over species; it's how those species are caught and what recreational fishermen perceive to be the inequities in the catch limits and the size limits, where commercial fishermen are allowed certain percentage of undersized fish. But those kinds of issues, I think, can be compromised, but you either allow those types of gear or you don't. there's no middle ground there. So as long as they're still allowed, I think you're gonna have this conflict. And I just don't know how to--that's the big nut to crack.

BGB: Right. Okay. Well, I think that's all our questions; do you have any parting thoughts on fisheries management, water quality, anything?

FT: I have fished my entire life. Fishing has meant a great deal to me, both professionally and spiritually. When I used to go to church, when the Priest would say, 'Where were you this morning?' I'd say, 'I was at church, Father.' He said, 'Where?' I said, 'The church of the surf!' [LAUGHTER] I don't go to church anymore, so I don't have to make up an excuse! But it has had a spiritual aspect for me. I can go fishing now and I don't care if I catch anything, it really is incidental. And as I said, I haven't kept a red drum in a very long time. I'll keep an occasional

flounder here and there, if I can catch one fifteen inches or bigger 'cause my wife likes to eat flounder; I probably wouldn't keep the flounder if I caught one. But I catch because it's part of who I am, I fish and catching is just incidental. So I would hate to see the last fish just disappear. Certainly, before I disappear! Once I'm gone, whatever happens, happens! [Laughs] But we--.

BGB: Well said, Commissioner! And I don't think we said this on record but Frank, you are a Town Commissioner, right? For Swansboro?

FT: Swansboro, right, I am. So whatever, wherever this goes, and however this ends, I'm gonna come down on the side of the ability of people to go out there and fish. I've taken kids, I've taken--my Doctor wants to go fishing, he's never gone fishing before--but it's everyone I've ever taken, you know. I kayak fish now, too, and there's a certain solitude to getting places where you can literally go and not see anyone, even this day and age. And that means a lot to me, and I would hate that we lose that, and we should do all we can to protect it. Hopefully it'll be enough so that the two sides in this debate will have enough room, and maybe someday, sometime, maybe they'll meet somewhere in the middle. Don't think it'll be in my lifetime!

BGB: Hey, you never know.

FT: You never know! But clearly, to fish at all, it requires having clean water. And completing the circle, going back to Sheepshead Bay now--and I haven't been in a number of years--but you probably still can catch something, I suspect, but you wouldn't ever think of eating it. You can go out to Plumb Beach, plum trees are gone, all of Jamaica Bay is--you wouldn't think of mucking around in Jamaica Bay anymore. So just in my lifetime that has happened, and we have something special here in North Carolina, we really do. And we need to realize that and protect it. And it's the reason why I do what I do, 'cause I like to fish.

BGB: Yeah. Alright, well that's a good spot to end. Thank you so much, Frank!

FT: Thank you, Barbara!

BGB: Appreciate it.

FT: Yep, yep.

[END OF INTERVIEW]