

F: You guys need any refreshments, any granola bars, cupcakes, fudge, bread?

Michael Jepson: I'm good.

F: You all good? Okay.

M: Thank you.

Paul Reeves: Thank you, [inaudible].

MJ: This is Michael Jepson. I'm in Steinhatchee, Florida. I'm talking with Paul Reeves. We're going to talk about red tide in this area. It's December 27th. Paul, I usually ask people to start telling me a little bit about how you got into fishing and how long you've been fishing.

PB: I grew up in Miami, South Miami, and I grew up commercial skin diving. We stone crabbed, and we lobster fished out of Miami and the upper Keys area. Then I ran traps as a kid, built our own traps, worked on a mullet boat in the Everglades National Park when it was legal, back in the day, as all through high school. Then I ended up going into the Coast Guard when I was eighteen, and I did twenty-five years in the Coast Guard. I commercial fished – I was stationed in Miami for a period of time, and I commercial fished on weekends. I ran mostly stone crab, spearfished grouper during those years that I was stationed there. Then I retired out of the Coast Guard in '03. I had bought a commercial boat and fished the South Atlantic. In my last – in about 2000, I bought another commercial boat, fished the South Atlantic out of –

MJ: What kind of fishing were you doing?

PB: I was doing snapper/grouper fishing out of Mayport, Florida, and did that for a handful of years. Then I had a friend that moved to this region, and I ended up coming over here and pretty much sold all that gear and moved over here. I was working full-time, but I ended up stone crabbing on weekends over here. Slowly, I got my foot back in the waters over here, and I built a pretty good stone crab – fished about three thousand traps over here, stone crab. I did weekends for a year or two with about five-hundred traps, and then I bought enough gear to do it full time. I quit my day job over there. I was an electronics technician, so I worked for – after I retired out of the Coast Guard, I worked as a marine electronics – a technician over in Jacksonville. I ended up coming over here and got more and more into fishing all the time. So stone crab was my deal. Then I bought a grouper – I bought another boat and started grouper/snapper fishing over here in the Gulf. I also seabass fished over here in the Gulf, and now I [fish for] stone crab, blue crab, and grouper fish.

MJ: So, all three.

PB: Yes.

MJ: What's the first red tide you remember in this area?

PB: The fall of 2014.

MJ: 2014.

PB: Yes.

MJ: Can you describe that red tide?

PB: Well, we were grouper fishing, and we were seabass fishing. We had state sea bass pots on the – and we fished pretty much a nine-mile line. When it hit in – I believe it was around late September of '14 – we rode all the way from Steinhatchee to Cedar Key, just looking at all the dead fish. There were thousands and thousands of small fish. There was hogfish, red grouper. We've seen some small tides before that kill a lot of the little fish like the little trout and sea snakes and stuff. But this was pretty severe, and it was killing the reef fish – the hogfish and the groupers, and whatnot.

MJ: If you had to draw an area that you saw that red tide in, on that map, could you kind of box it in?

PB: Well, to a degree. I don't know how far north it went. I mainly went out of Steinhatchee, and it basically – we went out of Steinhatchee, and then we worked to the – we rode all the way down to off of Cedar Key here, and we saw it there. Then, as we started grouper fishing later on, more towards October, that tide had pushed all the way out, and it pushed all the way out to the Middle Grounds. We had some phenomenal catches; we found some fish like the rest of the guys around that were bunched up out there. I don't know how far out it went. That's twenty fathoms. Probably all the way out. We know that tide was probably in that range. We got out to a hundred and twenty, hundred and thirty foot out there, north of the grounds, and we had some phenomenal catches. We had about eighteen-hundred pounds in about twelve hours, and then we turned around and ran back, and we had twenty-six-hundred pounds in twenty-four hours, in one stop.

MJ: That's unusual?

PB: Oh, extreme. It's once-in-a-lifetime fishing.

MJ: So you're saying this red tide was bunching all those fish up out there

PB: Yes, those fish just bunched up out there. I don't know which way they were going or what. But one of the local fishermen found them and then we all worked together. The best trip was twenty-six-hundred pounds of red grouper in one physical location and in one twenty-four hour period. So that is unusual.

MJ: Wow, that's good.

PB: Yes. I just happened to look in my logbooks the other day, and that was, I think, the first week in October, 7<sup>th</sup> of October.

MJ: So can you describe that red tide, what it was like? What it looked like? What it smelled like? Or did it have [inaudible]?

PB: Oh, yes. It was brown, real deep red-brown, looked like millions of little pieces of plankton in the water, and it just burned your throat as you rode through it. It made you do – as soon as you got into the area, you start –

MJ: How long did it take? That's a long trip for that [inaudible].

PB: Yes, yes. It was eighty, ninety miles of it, and we rode from Steinhatchee all the way off of Cedar Key, and it was beyond that.

MJ: It went further south to Cedar Key.

PB: It went further south Cedar Key.

MJ: On the inshore area?

PB: On the inshore, yes, out there about thirty foot. Right on the nine-mile line is where we rode on that. But then it seemed like it worked offshore, and we thought perhaps maybe it was getting pushed out of here, but it just seemed like maybe it was expanding because we did find the fish bunched up. There's the Middle Grounds here, so we found – just north of the Middle Ground area is where we found a lot of fish bunched up.

MJ: Did you see any difference as you're coming out here what species that were dead or anything like that?

PB: No. No, just the species changed a little bit. There were a lot of trout, little barracudas, little eels and stuff of that nature on the inshore stuff, a lot of redfish. Then as you got further offshore, it was more like hogfish and red grouper and whatnot. I don't think I saw any gags in there. I think it was mainly red grouper and hogfish offshore, some stuff like barracudas, and stuff like that. Trying to think of some – houndfish, ladyfish, things –

MJ: Wide variety?

PB: Yes, it was devastating. Then the couple of years following, it was like somebody poured bleach on the bottom. It literally had killed everything. It was crazy. I stone crabbed the following year and did real well on the stone crabs. So I don't know, maybe they came in to feed on the dead fish or something.

MJ: But that year, you couldn't [inaudible] stone crab.

PB: No, no. We caught a few crabs, but nothing –

MJ: Did you have to move? Were you moving your traps out the areas? Or out of red tide [inaudible]? Could you do that?

PB: You couldn't. There wasn't anywhere to move to. It was all-encompassing that year. So that year was pretty much a wash. But the following year –

MJ: But you could make up for it in the grouper fishing because you went further (overlapping conversation; inaudible).

PB: Well, that only lasted a week or two. About a week, really, and then it was done.

MJ: How were blue crabs affected by it?

PB: I'd have to check my records on blue crabs. I don't know how we – I don't think we did very well on either of the crab species. What we ended up doing was relocating. We couldn't catch any grouper in this area, so we ended up going fishing south, and we ended up relocating into Cortez.

MJ: Okay, so you went down there.

PB: I've been down in Cortez for four-and-a-half – what has it been? Five years now. Yes. I just brought my boat back just within the last –

MJ: Oh, really? So you've been fishing out of Cortez.

PB: Cortez, yes. Because we worked our way south looking for fish, trying to get out of the tide, and we ended up doing well down there. But they had the red tide last year, so their fishing has dropped off, and our fishing is starting to rebound, but it's still not where it should be. I was trying to – having your boat four hours away is difficult.

MJ: Well, did you live down there? Did you stay down there?

PB: No, I just –

MJ: You drove back? You drive down there every day?

PB: Yes, yes. Not every day, but –

MJ: Well, after you came in from a trip.

PB: Yes. For grouper fishing – grouper/snapper, we had the boat down there on a permanent basis until recently.

MJ: So that's adapting in a big way.

PB: Yes. Well, it sucked. It was hard. You can't keep an eye on things; you can't do your maintenance your way. It's just difficult, yes. Every time you wanted to go fishing or returned from fishing, it was a four-hour drive on top of everything else.

MJ: You sell your fish down there?

PB: I relocated, found a fish house to work out of – Cortez Bait & Seafood is who I fished for.

MJ: John Banyas.

PB: Yes, Johnny. They were nice enough to take us in, and we had a working relationship with them. Like I said, after their red tide, it slowed down again down there. So it just wasn't worth the extra effort to be down there. Our fishing is starting to pick up, return to – I don't know, I wouldn't even say it's fifty percent of what it was. But you just have to weigh things out, and we just found that it was time to come back.

MJ: Are you still doing all three – stone crabbing, blue crabbing, and grouper fishing?

PB: Yes, I am. I am.

MJ: Is there anything that you think management could do to help you adapt to all this?

PB: Quit taking our fish away. What aspect do you mean?

MJ: I don't know if there's any closings, openings, or anything like that. I guess when I was talking to some of the bait fishermen down in Cortez, they said, "Well, geez, some of these fish, if they let us harvest them." We know the red tide's going to kill them; we just harvest them before they – I think they're talking about mullet and stuff like that. I'm not really sure what management could do, but I don't know if you guys thought of that.

PB: The biggest thing for us – it seems like we're battling with the reductions of the amount, like they took sixty-some percent of our red grouper away. Now we're battling the recreational side wants another fifteen percent. We're running a business here. It's not just for fun like a lot of people think it is. We have a lot of money invested in this. I wasn't given anything. I bought my way into this industry because I had a career that didn't – I didn't qualify in the qualifying years because of my career. –

MJ: So you had to buy IFQ [individual fishing quota].

PB: I had to buy the permit. I had to buy all my fish, all my IFQ. I own some and I still lease some. So I have hundreds of thousands of dollars invested in this, and that's what – when they promoted this fishery going to IFQ, it was going to stabilize the industry. That was their big selling point. But when they come along and want to take our stuff away after you invested even more money into the fishery, that's not –

MJ: Doesn't sound like stability.

PB: No, it doesn't.

MJ: Tell me, how is this recovering? What is it that you see?

PB: Well, from what I've seen, the bottom bounced back. We ride around, and we're looking at the bottom all the time on our sounders. So we're looking for life; we're looking for growth. We can pretty much tell what we're looking at down there from seeing it every day. It looked as if somebody had poured bleach on the bottom. You'd come on a piece of bottom, and it'd be nice hard bottom, but there was no life on it. None. You could tell it was the right kind of bottom, but it just didn't look as if it was lit up with some life. But within a year or two, it's really come back, and it looked good. Looked really good. But there was no fish there. So it was strange because it looked right, but they just weren't there. I guess last year the red grouper – some small red grouper started to show up. We keep saying, "Well, maybe this is the year. Maybe they're going to show up." Again, this year there's a few more red grouper, but they're tiny; they're little, almost all little grouper. There's a lot of seventeen, eighteen-and-a-half inch fish, lots of them, which is a good sign, but it's not like it should be. So I think things are starting to rebound. The gags have been doing better year after year. Snapper are prolific. It looks like they're the ones that have capitalized on this red tide. The grouper got wiped out, I guess, or run off, and snapper have just taken over. They're as thick as fleas all the way into –

MJ: Do you have red snapper?

PB: I have, yes.

MJ: You have some?

PB: I have some.

MJ: Do you have enough?

PB: No, absolutely not. Absolutely not. That's another thing is it was based on landing history, and we didn't have a lot of red snapper at the time. So, of course, they got all of – the western side of the Gulf got the history because of their landings, and now we have the snapper, but nobody has the quota over here. So we're all leasing and doing what things we can, but it's just – it's crazy the prices these people are asking for this. I just almost rather throw it back than pay those prices. It just doesn't make a lot of sense to me.

MJ: So do you have to lease from the guys in the west that have more quota? Is that where most of the leasing is done?

PB: Well, I don't think it's – no, I don't go to the bigger players over there. But they made it where anybody could get in this and buy this. You don't have to have a permit; you don't have to – you don't even have to be a fisherman. You can just be a stockbroker with a pile of cash, and you can buy up quota. They're reselling it, basically leasing it for a higher price. It just ran the price up of everything. There's such a high demand for it. I'm not sure exactly who all the big players are, but snapper leased for approximately 4.25 a pound this year, and they're paying 5.50 to the boat was the a – probably I'd say was about the average. That's crazy. I can't run a boat and a business on a dollar a pound or so, or a dollar and a quarter.

MJ: So has any of this made you change? Well, I guess you're now coming back to fish in this area because it did force you to move away or at least put your boat down there. Any other changes in your fishing business that had to make?

PB: Well, I just have stayed a little longer, and just the margins are getting shrunken all the way around.

MJ: When you went down there, did you know where to fish?

PB: No, I had no idea. I'd never been there before. Just worked my way down there, did real well, said, "Well, this is where we need to be." We went back; we traveled a hundred-and-sixty miles each way. Did a couple of trips traveling back and forth.

MJ: Were you fishing in certain areas on the way down to see if you could find fish?

PB: Yes, yes.

MJ: Is that how you –?

PB: We fished pretty much all the time. We were always fishing our way. So we're sampling all the way down. Then we found some fish and got into them and did real well. Then, after a couple of trips like that, we went down and leased the spot and got settled in with the fish house. Decided that was what we were going to do. We did well. We did real well for a couple of years there, and then it just started to taper off a little bit, and then the red tide hit, and it was just really not worth the effort to be that far away at that point.

MJ: Are there any recommendations about monitoring the red tide or anything that you think would help you?

PB: Red tide, no. I already have a – I have a text alert that I get from the State of Florida, a weekly –

MJ: Tells you about the red tide?

PB: Yes, it does. It's typically a more inshore event than offshore. I was fishing down south off of Cortez, down a little south of there off of Fort Myers, and that red tide did come out to about a hundred to a hundred-and-ten foot out there. I was fishing right up against it. You could see clear water/dirty water, and we found a little seam of fish right in there. I guess it was –

MJ: Right there on the edge.

PB: Right on the edge. We were catching fish off of it.

MJ: Have you noticed any other changes out there in the water other than red tide? Is there anything else going on out there?

PB: You see a lot of plastics in the water, a lot of little pieces, little particles, a lot of broken up – a lot of times the water looks good, but it's almost – I don't know if it's pollution or what the deal is. It's just these fish – they don't seem to be bouncing back. They had all these – they were going to ban the nets, and that was going to save the trout and all that. Well, trout hasn't picked up any since the net ban. When they banned fish trapping, red grouper was going to rebound. That hasn't really rebounded. There's something else going on out there, whether it's pollution, or – this is a pretty rural area; you wouldn't think pollution would be the issue up here. But I understand there are some pipelines that go offshore and discharge out there. The Mississippi – I don't know. I ended up going to Louisiana on the oil spill. I was a licensed captain, so I went out there and worked a few years.

MJ: Help clean up?

PB: Yeas. I ran boats out there. I don't know, but they got more fish than we do, and it's twice as dirty out there.

MJ: Yes, they got a big [inaudible] out there, too.

PB: But they got the fish, I don't know why. It doesn't make a lot of sense. But that's the fishiest place I've ever seen.

MJ: Really?

PB: Oh, by far.

MJ: Is there anything else that I haven't covered that you think you'd like to point out about red tides? Just going out there on the water.

PB: I don't know. It's always been a natural event that's occurred.

MJ: That was pretty intense. What about that one down around Cortez [inaudible] this?

PB: It seemed like that one was more confined to the inland stuff, where ours went way offshore where we never expected it to go. You typically get – it hugs that shoreline, and it kills a little bit of inshore stuff, but this one went out to a hundred-and-twenty-foot or so, and that's a lot of bottom-up here because our shelf is so shallow. I don't know. Hopefully, it was a once in a lifetime event or something. But doesn't seem like it. Seemed to be a little more –

MJ: It's becoming the new normal [inaudible].

PB: Yes, yes.

MJ: But not in the same place. Who knows?

PB: Exactly. Well, the panhandle up there is known to have a lot of red tide in the panhandle, and down in the southwest.



MJ: More inshore?

PB: Yes, yes. It's typically more of an inshore event.

MJ: And that what the guys in Cortez told me. They see red tide popping up in those places all the time, but nothing like this [inaudible]. That's all I got unless you [inaudible].

PB: No. Glad you came.

MJ: Alright.

PB: Alright, thank you.

MJ: Thank you.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 7/1/2020