

Bill will educate a new generation of fishers

Jim Zurbrick,

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Jim Zurbrick (Photo: Your Turn)

There are times in this politically contentious period that common sense legislation still manages to move forward through the congressional process. The Young Fishermen's Development Act looks like it will be one of these bills that will make it to the finish line.

The act allows for funds that have been accumulated through fisheries violations and forfeitures to be used to educate the next generation of fishers, who are needed to replace aging members of the fleet, like myself. The educational programs will be tailored to the specific fisher's region: Alaska fishers will have many different aspects — like gear types, conservation regulations and safety requirements — from the Gulf of Mexico fishers.

The new “replacement” fishermen (as we in the industry like to call them) are needed. Our current average age is 58, and what's happening in our industry is similar to what is going on in other blue-collar professions like electricians, plumbers and machinists.

During the first week of May, I was fortunate to participate in meetings in Washington, D.C., when many U.S. Congressmen from both the House and the Senate discussed support for this

bill. Previous meetings on other fisheries issues never had the overwhelming support this bill has.

This legislation is sponsored by Alaska Rep. Don Young and Alaska Sen. Dan Sullivan; Florida Rep. Darren Soto has recently signed on as co-sponsor. We feel that Reps. Neal Dunn and Ted Yoho are seriously considering co-sponsoring. Rep. Al Lawson, who was a fisheries champion while serving for many years in the Florida state Senate, has signed on to this much needed legislation, as he understands the need for a vocational program to educate future participants in the seafood harvesting industry.

One needs to keep in mind that there will be no need for additional funding appropriations for this educational program, as the funds are already being held by National Marine Fisheries service.

On a personal note, I'm a 68-year-old fisherman who, like so many other older participants, is closing in on the end of a career of supplying wild caught domestic seafood to American consumer. In an ever-changing environment of equipment modifications, food trace-ability, seafood fraud and consumer health precautions, one must be much more knowledgeable about the seafood harvesting process than in the past. This is what the Young Fishermen's Development Act will address.

Jim Zurbrick has been a commercial fisherman from more than 30 years. He is from Steinhatchee.

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