Sea Grant keeps water-dependent businesses afloat through training, research and planning

RELEVANCE:
The national economic downturn and the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill continue to negatively impact a large cross section of water-dependent businesses along the Mississippi and Alabama coasts. The oil spill occurred while other stressors to water-dependent businesses were already causing significant impacts. These impacts include the conversion of working waterfronts to non-water-dependent uses, low seafood prices and complex seafood processing regulations. This has adversely impacted many sectors including the seafood industry, charter fishing industry and nature tourism.

RESPONSE:
The Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium is using a multi-pronged approach to help businesses and industries address numerous challenges facing the region. Sea Grant extension specialists trained shrimpers to make them eligible for economic relief funds through the Trade Adjustment Assistance Program and worked with processors to ensure that their Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP) training was up to date so they could remain operational. In addition, MASGC research revealed strategies to increase production for shrimp farmers in the region. MASGC led the development and facilitation of the Alabama Waterfront Access Study Committee, a legislative committee that brought together stakeholders and representatives from government and business, to develop recommendations that will protect, preserve and promote working waterfronts and waterfront access. These recommendations address issues of planning and zoning, financial incentives, and socio-economic and infrastructure needs. Finally, MASGC provided resources and training to the expanding nature tourism industry and the charter fishing industry through certification programs for tour operators and boat captains and crews.

RESULTS:
- Shrimpers became eligible for $1,864,000 in Trade Adjustment Assistance payments because of MASGC-provided training.
- MASGC’s Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) training prevented one seafood processor from losing a significant national supermarket chain account and shutting down permanently.
- Sea Grant-supported research led to an increase of 500 pounds per acre for inland shrimp farms with a total economic impact of $175,000 per year.
- When a Sea Grant-supported pilot oyster farm was initiated and proved successful, a new business sector was started with sales totaling $15,000 in 2010. Five other potential oyster farmers plan to enter the industry and have submitted applications for permits for a newly established 50-acre community oyster farming lease.
- In accordance with the recommendations the Alabama Waterfront Access Study Committee made to the State of Alabama, MASGC facilitated training for 31 regional, state, county and municipal planners from Alabama and Mississippi in developing model language for waterfront planning that incorporates measures to protect and preserve working waterfronts.
- About 135 nature tourism operators and charter-fishing professionals participated in industry-specific trainings developed and led by Sea Grant. These programs increased their earnings potential and improved the quality of their tours and fishing charters.