

ISSUES AND CONCERNS

Alabama's working waterfronts are valuable, not only economically, but they are an integral part of the social, cultural, ecological and aesthetic fabric of the state. The coastal area of Alabama is rich with a variety of commercial, recreational and natural resources. The positive economic impact of the Alabama coastal areas include the Port of Mobile, recreation and tourism, energy resources, commercial fisheries and recreational and commercial fishing-related activities.

As the coast changes geographically and demographically, there are increasing and competing demands for waterfront access. More and more people are moving to coastal areas and seeking homes along the waterfront. As a local economy expands, concerns over land use conflicts have become common. In particular, in states with relatively undeveloped coastal areas, issues related to working waterfronts have gained interest in recent years. The coastal areas of Southwest Alabama are somewhat split in that the Eastern shore, to include Gulf Shores and Orange Beach, rely mainly on charter fishing and tourism-related activities, while the Western shore, relies more on working waterfront activities and businesses (commercial fishing, processing, shipping, ship building and repair, etc.)

In coastal Alabama, already increasing pressure for waterfront access multiplied in the months after Hurricane Katrina, thus the Alabama Working Waterfront Coalition was formed. The coalition consists of representatives from a wide group of stakeholders, including commercial and charter fishing, processing, shipbuilding, real estate and tourism.

In 2006, Maine Sea Grant, in coordination with other agencies, surveyed extension professionals, coastal managers and others around the country to determine what the common issues and concerns are regarding working waterfronts. According to their publication, "Access to the Waterfront: Issues and Solutions Across the Nation," 153 million people (more than half the U.S. population) live in coastal zones. Over the next 50 years, the number of people 65 and over in the coastal zones is expected to increase 147%. These geographic and demographic changes are causing a shift away from resource-based industries to residential and business development to service these populations.

Several states, to include Maine, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina and Florida have conducted studies to identify those factors that affect working waterfronts and to make recommendations for protecting them. Maine, Florida and North Carolina have passed legislation that provides not only tax relief for owners of working waterfront properties, but also mandates funding to acquire properties in peril. South Carolina already has legislation that mandates that working waterfront properties be assessed at "current use" rather than "best or highest use." Maryland has recently passed legislation that provides a tax credit for owners of working waterfront properties.

From these studies and others conducted throughout the country, there emerges a common list of issues and concerns for working waterfronts. These “causes and effects” include:

- Increased population growth;
- Rising real estate values and property taxes;
- Assessment of property taxes that conflict (current use v. best or highest use);
- Decrease in commercial fishing profitability due to international competition, stock collapse, fishing regulations, rising fuel and operating costs, all leading to the inability to pay taxes and the conversion of the waterfront property to other uses;
- Loss of commercial waterfront properties that supply services to commercial fishermen, such as seafood processing and shipping, ice, fuel, wet and dry dock storage, repair and maintenance;
- Conflicting needs for water access and use by commercial, recreational and private interests;
- Shortage of public access to public trust waters, docks and piers;
- Shortage of boat slips for commercial vessels, due to recreational and private use;
- High-rise development along the waterfront that obscures public visual and physical access;
- Lack of comprehensive plans that include land-use provisions for the right mix of commercial, recreational and residential uses for the waterfront community;
- Loss of social, cultural and diverse aspects essential in defining community character, strength and heritage.

Along with Maine, Maryland, Florida and North Carolina, Alabama created a legislative commission to study and make recommendations for protecting and preserving its working waterfronts. In 2008, the Alabama legislature passed HJR 656, creating the Waterfront Access Study Committee. The committee is tasked with studying the degree of loss and potential loss of the diversity of uses along the coast of Alabama and how these losses impact access to the coastal public trust waters of the State. Following the study, the committee will make recommendations to the legislature regarding incentive-based techniques and management tools that would be appropriate for protecting and preserving Alabama’s working waterfronts.